

Science Fantasy



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**MICHAEL
MOORCOCK**

The
Eternal Champion

J. G. BALLARD
The Watch-Towers

EDWARD MACKIN

Under The
Lemonade Hat

**THEODORE R.
COGSWELL**



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In the Cycle of Time many things may repeat themselves, especially in the lives of men and half-lings. This is a story of the dim and distant past—or the far-flung future, whichever way you look at it.

THE ETERNAL CHAMPION

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

They called for me, that is all I really know. They called for me and I went to them, for I could not do otherwise. The will of the whole of Humanity was a strong thing and it smashed through the ties of Time, the chains of Space and dragged me to it. Why me? I still do not know, though they thought they had told me. But I am here, shall always be here and if, as wise men tell me, Time is cyclic, then I shall one day return to the Twentieth Century A.D.—for (it was no doing of mine) I am immortal.

o n e

Between wakefulness and sleeping, we have most of us had the illusion of hearing voices, scraps of conversation, phrases spoken in unfamiliar tones. Sometimes we attempt to attune our minds so that we can hear more, but we are rarely successful. Between wakefulness and sleeping, I began, every night, to hear voices . . .

Had I hung, for an eternity in limbo? Was I alive—dead? Was there a memory of a world which lay in the far past or the distant future? Of another world which seemed closer? And

the names? Was I John Daker or Erekoze? Was I either of these? Many other names, Shaleen, Artos, Brian, Umpata, Roland, Ilanth, Ulysses, Alric, fled away down the ghostly rivers of my memory. I hung in darkness, bodiless. A man spoke. Where was he? I tried to look but had no eyes to see.

"Erekoze the Champion, where are you?"

Another voice, then: "Father . . . it is only a legend . . ."

"No, Iolinda. I feel he is listening. Erekoze . . ."

I tried to answer, but had no voice. Swirling half-dreams of a house in a great city of miracles, a swollen, grimy city of miracles, crammed with dull-coloured machines, many of which bore human passengers. Of buildings, beautiful beneath their coatings of dust and of other, brighter buildings not so beautiful, with austere lines and many glass windows. Of a troop of riders galloping over an undulating countryside, flamboyant in armour of lacquered gold, coloured pennants draped around their blood-encrusted lances. Their faces were heavy with weariness. Of more faces, many faces, some which I half recognised, others which were unfamiliar, people clad in strange clothes. A picture of a white haired, middle-aged man who had a tall, spiked crown upon his head. His mouth moved, he was speaking . . .

"Erekoze, it is I, King Rigenos, Defender of Humanity. You are needed again, Erekoze. The Hounds of Evil rule a third of the world and humankind is weary with the war against them. Come to us, Erekoze, and lead us to victory. From the Plains of Melting Ice to the Mountains of Sorrow they have set up their corrupt standard and I fear they will advance yet further into our territories."

The woman's voice: "Father, this is only an empty tomb. Not even the mummy of Erekoze remains—it became drifting dust long ago. Let us leave and return to Necranal to marshal the living peers."

I felt like a fainting man who strives to fight against dizzy oblivion but, however much he tries, cannot take control of his own brain. Again I tried to answer, but could not.

It was as if I wavered backwards through Time, while every atom of me wanted to go forwards. I had the sensation of vast size as if I were made of stone with eye-lids of granite, measuring miles across—eye-lids which I could not open. And then I was

tiny—the most minute grain in the Universe, and yet I felt I belonged to the whole far more than the stone giant.

Memories came and went. The whole panorama of the Twentieth Century, its beauties and its bitternesses, its satisfactions, its striving, rushed into my mind like air into a vacuum. But it was only momentary, for the next second my entire being was flung elsewhere—to a world which was Earth, but not the Earth of John Daker, not quite the world of dead Erekoze, either.

There were three great continents, two close together, divided from the other by a vast sea containing many islands, large and small.

I saw an ocean of ice which I knew to be slowly shrinking—the Plains of Melting Ice. I saw the third continent which bore lush flora, mighty forests, blue lakes and was bound along its northern coasts by a towering chain of mountains—the Mountains of Sorrow. This I knew to be the domain of the Eldren, whom King Rigenos had called the Hounds of Evil.

Now, on the other two continents, I saw the wheatlands of the West on the continent of Zavara, with their tall cities of multicoloured rock, the rich cities of the wheatlands—Stalaco, Calodemia, Mooros and Ninadoon.

There were the great seaports—Shilal, Wedmah, Sinana, Tarkar, and Noonos of towers cobbled with precious stones.

Then I saw the fortress cities of the Continent of Necralala, with the capital city Necranal chief among them, built on, into and about a mighty mountain, peaked by the spreading palace of its warrior kings.

Now a little more came clear as, in the background of my awareness, I heard a voice calling *Erekoze, Erekoze, Erekoze* . . .

The warrior kings of Necranal, kings for two thousand years of a humanity united, at war, and united again. The warrior kings of whom King Rigenos was the last living and ageing now, with only a daughter, Iolinda, to carry on his line. Old and weary with hate—but still hating. Hating the unhuman folk whom he called the Hounds of Evil, mankind's age-old enemies, reckless and wild, linked, it was said, by a thin line of blood to the human race—an outcome of a union between an ancient Queen and the Evil One, Azmobaana. Hated by King Rigenos as soulless immortals, slaves of Azmobaana's machinations.

And, hating, he called upon John Daker, whom he called Erekoze, to aid him with his war against them.

"Erekoze, I beg thee answer me. Are you ready to come?" His voice was loud and echoing and when, after a struggle, I could reply, my own voice seemed to echo, also.

"I am ready," I replied, "but seemed to be chained."

"*Chained?*" There was consternation in his voice. "Are you, then, a prisoner of Azmobaana's frightful minions. Are you trapped upon the Ghost Worlds?"

"Perhaps," I said. "But I do not think so. It is Space and Time which chain me. I am separated from you by a gulf."

"How may we bridge that gulf and bring you to us?"

"The united wills of humanity may serve the purpose."

"Already we pray that you may come to us."

"Then continue," I said.

I was falling away again. I thought I remembered laughter, sadness, pride. Then, suddenly, more faces, I felt as if I witnessed the passing of everyone I had known, down the ages, and then one face superimposed itself over the others—the head and shoulders of an amazingly beautiful woman, with blonde hair piled beneath a diadem of precious stones which seemed to light the sweetness of her oval face. "Iolinda," I said. I saw her more solidly now. She was clinging to the arm of the tall, gaunt man who wore a crown—King Rigenos.

They stood before an empty platform of quartz and gold and, resting on a cushion of dust was a straight sword which they dared not touch. Neither did they dare step too close to it for it gave off a radiation which might slay them.

It was a tomb in which they stood. The Tomb of Erekoze—my tomb. I moved towards the platform, hanging over it. Ages before, my body had been placed there. I stared at the sword which held no dangers for me but was unable, in my captivity, to pick it up. It was my spirit only which inhabited the dark place—but the whole of my spirit now, not the fragment which had inhabited the tomb for thousands of years. The fragment which had heard King Rigenos and had enabled John Daker to hear it, to come to it and be united with it.

"Erekoze!" called the king, straining his eyes through the gloom as if he had seen me. "Erekoze—we pray."

Then I experienced the dreadful pain which I suppose a woman to go through when bearing a child. A pain that seemed eternal and yet was intrinsically its own vanquisher. I

was screaming, writhing in the air above them. Great spasms of agony—but an agony complete with purpose—the purpose of creation.

At last I was standing, materially, before them.

"I have come," I said. "I am here, King Rigenos. I have left nothing worthwhile behind me—but do not let me regret that leaving."

"You will not regret it, Champion." He was pale, exhilarated, smiling. I looked at Lolinda who dropped her eyes modestly and then, as if against her will, raised them again to regard me. I turned to the dais on my right.

"My sword," I said reaching for it.

I heard King Rigenos sigh with satisfaction.

"They are doomed, now, the dogs," he said.

They had a sheath for the sword. It had been made days before. King Rigenos left to get it, leaving me alone with Lolinda. I did not question my being there and neither, it seemed, did she. We regarded one another silently until the king returned with the scabbard.

"This will protect us against your sword's poison," he said.

I took it, slid the sword into it. The scabbard was opaque, like glass. The metal was unfamiliar to me, as John Daker, light, sharp, dull as lead. Yet the feel of it awaked dim remembrance which I did not bother to arouse. Why was I the only one who could wear the sword without being affected by its radiation?

Was it because I was constitutionally different in some way to the rest of these people? Was it that the ancient Erekoze and the unborn John Daker (or was that *vice versa*?) had metabolisms which had become adapted in some way against the power which flowed from the sword?

I had become, in that transition from my own age to this, unconcerned. It was as if I was aware that my fate had been taken out of my own hands to a large extent. I had become a tool. If only I had known for what I should be used, then I might have fought against the pull and remained harmless, ineffectual John Daker. But perhaps I could not have fought.

At any rate, I was prepared from the moment I materialised in the Tomb of Erekoze to do whatever Fate demanded of me. Later, things were to change.

I walked out of the tomb into a calm day, warm with a light breeze blowing. We stood on a small hill.

Below us a caravan awaited—there were richly caparisoned horses and a guard of men dressed in that same golden armour I had seen in my dreams, but these warriors were fresher looking.

The armour was fluted, embellished with raised designs, ornate and beautiful but, according to my sparse reading on the subject of armour, coupled with Ereko's stirring memory, totally unsuitable for war. The fluting and embossing acted as a trap to catch the point of a spear or sword, whereas armour should be made to turn a point. This armour, for all its beauty, acted more as an extra danger than a protection.

The guards were mounted on heavy war horses but the beasts that knelt awaiting us resembled a kind of camel out of which all the camel's lumpen ugliness had been bred. These beasts were beautiful. On their high backs were cabins of ebony, ivory and mother-o'-pearl, curtained in scintillating silks.

We walked down the hill and, as we walked, I noticed that I was dressed in the pyjamas I had worn when first I went to bed. I was surprised, although they were not wholly incongruous, since the king's garments were flowing and loose, but they seemed wrong. I felt that I should have left these, also, behind me—on another body. But perhaps there is no body left behind.

At the request of the king, who seemed to be slightly wary of me, though he himself had summoned me, I entered the cabin he indicated and found it completely lined with deep cushions.

The camels climbed to their feet and we began to move swiftly through a narrow valley, its sides lined with evergreen trees which I could not place, something like spreading monkey-puzzle trees, but with more branches and broader leaves. The sword was across my knees. I inspected it. It was a plain, soldier's sword having no markings, a hilt of iron which fitted perfectly into my right hand as I gripped it. It was a good sword, but why it was poisonous to other humans I did not know. Presumably it was also lethal to those whom King Rigenos called the Hounds of Evil—the Eldren.

On we travelled, through the soft day, until I saw a city I recognised as Necranal, the city I had seen in my dreams. Far away, it towered upwards so that the entire mountain upon

which it was built was hidden by buildings of wondrous architecture. Minarets, steeples and battlements shone in the sun and, above them all, the huge palace of the warrior kings, a noble structure, many-towered, the Palace of Ten Thousand Windows as it was called.

I heard the king cry from his cabin :

"Katorn ! Ride ahead and tell the people that Erekoze the Champion has come to drive the Evil Ones back to the Mountains of Sorrow."

"Aye, sire," said the man addressed, a sullen-faced individual, the Captain of the Imperial Guard I presumed.

He drew his horse out of line and galloped speedily along the road of white dust which wound, now, down an incline. I could see the road stretching for many miles into the distance towards Necranal. I watched the rider for a while but eventually wearying of this, strained my eyes to make out details in the great city structure.

The cities of London, New York and Tokyo were probably bigger in area, but not much. Necranal was spread around the base of the mountain for many miles. Surrounding the city was a high wall upon which turrets were mounted at intervals.

So, at last, we came to the great Main Gate of Necranal which swung open to admit us and we passed through into streets packed with jostling, cheering people who shouted so loudly I was forced, at times, to cover my ears for fear they would burst.

t w o

At length our little caravan arrived at the summit of the mountain and the Palace of Ten Thousand Windows.

Here, I was shown the apartments prepared for me, some twenty rooms, most of them luxuriously furnished, but a few austere, weapon-lined. I was left alone and slaves brought me refreshment.

I felt as if I had been asleep for a long time and had awakened invigorated. I paced the rooms, exploring them, taking more interest in the weapons than in the furnishings which would have delighted even the most jaded sybirite. I stepped out on to one of several covered balconies and surveyed the great city of Necranal as the sun set over it. The far away sky was full of smoky colour, purples and oranges, yellows and blues, these colours reflected in the domes and steeples of Necranal so that

the entire city seemed to take on a softer texture, like a pastel drawing. As night came, slaves entered with lamps and placed them about the rooms.

When they were gone, the king and Katorn, Captain of the Imperial Guard, came and joined me as I stood on the balcony.

"Forgive us," said King Rigenos, "if we come immediately to the Matter of the Human Kingdoms."

"Certainly," I said. "I am ready." I was in fact very curious to learn the position.

"As I told you in the tomb, the Eldren now dominate the entire Southern Continent which they call Mernadin. Five years ago they recaptured the only real outpost we had on Mernadin—their ancient seaport of Paphanaal. There was little fighting. I admit that we had grown complacent and when they suddenly swept out of the Mountains of Sorrow we were unprepared."

"You were able to evacuate most of your colonies, I take it?" I put in.

"There was little evacuation necessary—Mernadin was virtually uninhabited since human beings would not live in that land where the Hounds of Evil once ruled—and rule now. They believe the continent to be cursed, inhabited by the spirits of Hell."

"Then why did you drive the Eldren back to the mountains in the first place if you had no need of their territories?"

"Because while they had the land under their control they were a constant threat to Humanity."

"I see. Continue."

"That threat is once again imminent," the king's voice was thick and trembling. His eyes were full of fear and hatred. "We expect them, at any moment, to launch an attack upon the Two Continents—upon Zavara and Necralala."

"Have you had any indication, as yet, that they plan invasion?" I asked. "And if so, how long we have to ready ourselves?"

"They'll attack!" Katorn's bleak eyes came to life. The thin beard framing his pale face seemed to bristle.

"They'll attack," agreed King Rigenos. "They would have overrun us now if we did not constantly war against them. We have to keep them back—once a breach is made, they will engulf us. Humanity, though, is battle-weary. We needed one of two things—fresh warriors or a leader to give the

warriors we have new hope. The former was impossible—all Mankind fights the Eldren menace. So I called you, Erekoze, and held you to your vow.”

“That vow?” I said.

“That if ever the Eldren dominated Mernadin again you would come to decide the struggle between them and Humanity.”

I sighed. As John Daker I saw a meaningless war between two ferocious, blindly hating factions both of whom seemed to be conducting racial *jehads*, but the danger was patent. Humanity had to be saved.

“The Eldren,” I continued. “What do they say?”

“Under torture they die, but they will not speak their true plans. They are cunning—talk of peace, of mutual help. You cannot trust an Eldren wolf—they are treacherous, immoral and evil. We shall not be safe until their whole race is destroyed utterly. You must lead us to victory, Erekoze.”

“I will lead you,” I said as Iolinda joined us.

So I talked with generals and admirals. We pored over maps and discussed tactics, logistics, available men, animals and ships, while the fleets massed and the Two Continents were scoured for warriors, from boys of fifteen to men of fifty, all were marshalled beneath the double banner of Humanity which bore the arms of Zavara and Necralala and the standards of their King, Rigenos, their War Champion Erekoze. We planned a great land-sea invasion of Mernadin’s chief harbour and the surrounding province—Paphanaal.

Once Paphanaal, province and city, was taken we should have a beachhead from which other attacks inland could be made. When not conferring with the generals, I practiced weaponry, riding, until I was skilled in those arts. It was more a case of remembering old skills than learning new ones.

The night before we were due to leave, to sail down the River Droonaa to the port of Noonos and join the fleets, I walked with Iolinda, of whom I had seen much, her arm in mine, along the closed balconies of the Palace of a Thousand Windows.

With such speed had matters passed that I still retained my earlier insouciant demeanour. It also seemed natural that after we had conversed a little I should take her face between my hands and raise it up so that I could look down at its beauty. And also, naturally, we kissed.

Her breathing was less regular and she smiled with a mixture of pride and tenderness.

"When I return," I spoke softly, "we shall be married."

She nodded her head, drawing off her hand a wonderfully worked ring of gold, pearls and rose-coloured diamonds. This she placed on my little finger—"A token of my love," she said, "To bring you luck in your battles, to remind you of me."

I had no ring to give her. I said as much, feeling embarrassed, inadequate.

"Your word is enough," she said. "Swear that you will return to me."

"That I'll swear," I said feelingly. We looked around as guilty lovers do, for we had heard the approach of footsteps.

Into my apartments came slaves, preceded by King Rigenos. He was excited. The slaves were bearing pieces of black armour of marvellous workmanship.

"This," said the king, "is the armour of Erekoze, broken from its tomb of rock for Erekoze to wear again."

The armour was, unlike that worn by the Imperial Guard, smooth without embellishment. The shoulder pieces were grooved fanning high and away from the head to channel a blow of sword, axe or lance away from the wearer. The helmet, breastplates and the rest were all grooved in the same manner. The metal was light but very strong, like that of the sword, but the black lacquer shone. In its simplicity the armour was beautiful. The only ornament, a thick plume of scarlet horse-hair, sprang from the top of the helm and cascaded down the smooth sides. I touched the armour with the reverence one has for fine art—for fine art designed to protect one's life.

"Thank you, King Rigenos," I said. "I will wear it tomorrow when we set sail for Noonos."

Overlaying my excitement for the coming war was my love for Iolinda which seemed to be a calmer, purer love, so much higher than carnal love that it was a thing apart. Perhaps this was the chivalrous love which the Peers of Christendom had held above all other?

That night, I lay at peace, thinking of Iolinda, and in the morning slaves brought my armour to me and helped me don it. It fitted perfectly, comfortably and was no weight at all. With my poisonous sword in its protecting scabbard, I strode to the Great Hall where the Peers of Humanity had been summoned.

There, in the Great Hall hung with hundreds of bright banners which descended from the high, domed roof, the Marshals, the Captains and the Knights were gathered in splendid array.

A little group of Marshals kneeled behind me as I kneeled before the king. Behind them were a hundred captains, behind them five thousand knights, all kneeling. And surrounding us, along the walls, were the old nobles, the Ladies of the Court, Men-at-arms at attention, slaves and squires. And all watched me. I, Erekoze, Champion of Humanity, was to be their saviour. They knew it.

In my confidence, I knew it, also.

The king spoke :

"Erekoze the Champion, Marshalls, Captains and Knights of Humanity—we go to wage war against inhuman evil, to save our fair continents from the Eldren menace. This expedition will be decisive. With Erekoze to lead us we shall win the port and province of Paphanaal, but that will be the first stage in our campaigns."

He paused and then spoke again into the silence :

"More battles must follow fast upon the first so that the hated Hounds of Evil will, once and for all, be destroyed, men and women—even children must perish. We drove them to their holes in the Mountains of Sorrow once, but this time we must not let their race survive. Let only their memory remain to remind us what evil is !"

"We will destroy the Eldren !" we roared, intoxicated by the tense atmosphere of the Great Hall.

"Swear it !" shouted the king and the hatred boiled from his eyes, seared from his voice.

"We so swear ! We will destroy the Eldren !"

"Go now, Paladins of Mankind—go—*destroy the Eldren filth !*"

We rose to our feet, turned in precision, and marched from the Great Hall into a day noisy with the swelling roars of the people.

Down the winding streets of Necranal we marched, myself in the lead, my sword raised as if already victorious, down towards the waiting ships which were ready on the river.

Oars were slipped through the ports and dipped into the placid river waters, strong men, three to a sweep, sat upon the rowing benches. Fifty ships stretched along the river banks, bearing the standards of fifty proud paladins.

The people of Necranal lined the banks, cheering, cheering so that we became used to their voices, as men become used to the sounds of the sea, scarcely hearing them. Richly decorated cabins were built on the decks and the ships of the Paladins had several masts bearing furled sails of painted canvas.

I went aboard the king's great man-o'-war, a ship with fifty pairs of oars and eight tall masts. Alone for a while in the sumptuous cabin assigned me I parted from Iolinda with a tender kiss.

She went ashore. The king and the captain, his dark eyes veiled, joined me. Katorm seemed to dislike me. For my part I was not attracted to his sullen personality, but he was a good soldier and I allowed no emotion to guide my decisions in the Matter of the Human Kingdoms.

We hauled in our anchors and the drums pounded out the slow rowing rhythm. We beat down the Droonaa river, with the current, moving fast towards Noonos of the Jewelled Towers and the fleets.

"Goodbye, Iolinda," I said softly, waving from the stern of the swaying vessel and then we had rounded a bend in the river and saw only the rearing city of Necranal above and behind us.

Goodbye, Iolinda.

I was sweating in my wargear for the day was oppressed by a great flaming sun, blazing in a cloudless sky.

The drums beat on. The rowers pulled. Speedily we sailed to Noonos and the Fleets of Humanity.

Excited, tense, alert and confident of victory, we sailed for Paphanaal, gateway to Mernadin and conquest.

I knew little of the Eldren for they were constantly described in terms of hatred and fear. They were inhumanly beautiful, it seemed, inhumanly merciless, amoral and evil. They were slightly taller than the average man, had long heads with slanting cheek-bones—devilish, Rigenos had said—and had no orbs to their eyes. Terrible reckless fighters, they were, cunning and ruthless.

But I felt the need to know more of them. My cloudy memory, as Erekoze, could only conjure an impression of confused battles against them and, also, somewhere a feeling of emotional pain. That was all.

The sea was a good one for the whole month of our sailing and, one day, we came close to Mernadin and lookouts shouted

that ships approached. We saw them, at last—a fleet of scarcely half our number. I smiled without humour because I knew we should be victorious.

The Eldren ships came close ! I gasped at their rare grace as they leapt lightly over the water like dolphins.

They were not galleons, but ships of sail only and the sails diaphanous on slim masts. White hulls broke the darker white of the surf as they surged wildly, without faltering, towards us. They mounted a few cannon, but not so many as ours. Their cannon, however, were slender and silver and when I saw them I feared their power.

I saw glimpses of eldritch faces, but could not, at that distance, make out special characteristics.

We gave the orders to heave to, rocked in the sea awaiting the Eldren shark-ships speeding towards us. We manoeuvred, as planned, to form a square with one end opened.

Some eighty ships were at the far end of the square, set stem to stern with cannon bristling while the two other sides were levelled at a safe distance across so that their cannon were out of range of each other. We placed a thinner wall of ships, about twelve, at the open end to give the impression of a closed square.

The Eldren craft, cannon roaring, smashed into the twelve 'bait' ships and, under their own impetus, sailed on to find themselves surrounded on three sides. As they came through, the far ships slowly closed in to form a triangle, trapping the Eldren vessels.

I had never seen such highly manoeuvrable sailing craft as those used by the Eldren. Slightly smaller than our men-o'-war, they darted about and their cannon bellowed roaring balls of flame—fire-bombs, not solid shot. Many of our ships were fired and blazed, crackling and groaning as the flames consumed them. Our ranks began to break and we sailed implacably in to crush the Eldren ships.

So far there had been no hand-to-hand fighting. The battle had depended upon tactics, but now as we closed, grapples were hurled towards the shark-ships of the Eldren and their barbs cut into the white rails, pulling the sailing craft towards them.

In the fore of the battle, our cannon gouting and the whole ship reverberating with the mighty roar, we smashed full with our rams into a slender Eldren craft and broke it completely in

two. I saw figures throw up their arms and I heard King Rigenos laughing behind me as the Eldren drowned, with few cries, *in silence*.

Our ship moved through the wreckage it had created, surrounded by orange tongues of flame, shrieks and yells, thick smoke which obscured vision in all directions so that it was impossible to tell how the Fleets of Humanity fared.

Rigenos pointed through the smoke, his eyes screwed up against its acrid blossomings: "There! The Eldren flagship. With luck that cursed servant of Azmobaana may be aboard. Pray that the Eldren Prince rides her, Erekoze, for if he does our cause is truly won."

I paid him little heed but shouted the order for grappling irons to be readied. Our vessel reared up on a surging wave and then rode it down towards the Eldren flagship. Our grapples were flung, we locked.

King Rigenos bellowed across the narrow drop between our craft and that of the Eldren: "This is King Rigenos and his champion Erekoze. I'd speak with your Commander for a moment, in the usual truce. If your master Arjavh of Mernadin is there let him come and do battle with the king's champion!"

Through the shifting smoke I saw, dimly, a pointed golden face with milky blue-flecked eyes staring strangely from the sockets of the slanting head. An eldritch voice, like music, sang across the sea: "I am Duke Baynahn, Commander of the Eldren fleet. I have to tell thee that our Prince Arjavh is not aboard. He is in the West, in Loos Ptokai, and could not get to Paphanaal for the battle."

Rigenos turned to his captain, Katorn, who bore a heavy crossbow. "Kill that one, Katorn," he said quietly.

Duke Baynahn continued: "However, I am prepared to fight your champion if . . ."

"No!" I cried to Katorn, "Stop! King Rigenos, that is dishonourable—you speak during a truce."

"There is no question of honour, Erekoze, when exterminating vermin. That you will soon learn. Kill him, Katorn!"

The bolt whirled from the bow and I heard a soft gasp as it penetrated the Eldren speaker's throat. He fell. I was in a rage at the treachery shown by one who spoke so often of treachery in his enemies, but there was no time to remonstrate for I had to lead a boarding party and swiftly while we retained the advantage.

I took a trailing rope, unsheathed my glowing sword and cried : " For Humanity ! Death to the Hounds of Evil ! "

I swung down, the heated air slashing against my face in that swift passage, and dropped, with howling warriors behind me, among the Eldren ranks.

Then we were fighting.

My followers took care to stay away from me as the sword opened pale wounds in the Eldren foes, destroying all whom it lightly touched. There was no battle-joy in me as I fought, for no skill was needed for such slaying.

The slender shark-ships seemed to hold more men than I had estimated. The long-skulled Eldren, well aware that my sword touch was lethal, flung themselves at me with ferocious courage.

Many of them wielded long-hafted axes, swinging at me out of reach of my sword. The sword was not sharper than most and although I hacked at the shafts I succeeded only in splintering them slightly. I had constantly to duck, stab beneath the whirling axes.

A golden-haired Eldren leapt at me, swung his axe and it smashed against my shoulder plate knocking me off balance. I rolled, trying desperately to regain my footing on the blood-smeared deck. The axe smashed down again, on to my breastplate, wounding me. I struggled to a crouching position, plunged forward beneath the axe and slashed at the Eldren's wrist. He moaned and died. The poison had done its work again.

Now I saw we had the advantage. The last pocket of fiercely fighting Eldren were on the main deck, back to back around their banner—a scarlet field bearing the Silver Basilisk of Mernadin. They were engulfed by our forces and, although all were badly wounded, fought until slain. They knew we should give them no mercy.

Katorn who had led the attack on the main deck snatched down the banner and flung it in the flowing blood of the Eldren, trampling it. " Thus will all the Eldren perish ! " he shouted in triumph.

Now a kind of silence drifted over the scene as the smoke dissipated, hanging in the air high above us. The day was won. Not one prisoner had been taken. The human warriors were busy firing the remaining Eldren vessels.

" Surely," said I to Katorn, " That is a waste—we could use these ships to replace those lost."

"Use these cursed craft—never," he said with a twist of his mouth and strode to the rail of the Eldren flagship, shouting to his men to follow him back to our own vessel.

We clambered aboard our ship. The grapples were removed and the Eldren ship yawed away.

"Fire it," cried King Rigenos who had taken no part in the actual fighting, though I knew it was said he was a brave man. "Fire the thing."

Blazing arrows were accurately shot into bales of combustible materials which had been placed in specific parts of the Eldren ship. The slender vessel caught and drifted, blazing away, from us.

The fleets reassembled. We had lost fourteen men-o'-war and a hundred smaller craft—but nothing remained of the Eldren fleet save burning hulks which we left, sinking, behind us as we sailed on, gleeful, to Paphanaal.

t h r e e

Night came before we came to the harbour city, so we lay at anchor a league or so offshore.

In the shifting dawn of the morrow we upped anchors and rowed in towards Paphanaal, for there was no wind to fill our sails.

Nearer we came to land.

I saw cliffs and black mountains rising.

Nearer and I saw a flash of brighter colour to the east of us. "*Paphanaal!*" shouted the lookout from his precarious perch on the highest mast.

Nearer and there was Paphanaal, undefended as far as we could make out. We had left her fleet on the bottom of the ocean, far behind.

There were no domes on this city, no minarets. There were steeples and buttresses and battlements, all close together making the city seem like one great palace. The materials of their construction were breathtaking—white marble veined with pink, blue, green and yellow, faced with gold, basalt and quartz and bluestone in abundance. It was a shining city, of marvels.

We saw no one as we came close and I guessed that the city had been deserted. But I was wrong.

We put in to the great harbour and disembarked. I formed our armies into disciplined ranks and warned them of a possible trap, although I didn't really believe there could be one.

They stood before King Rigenos, Katorn and I, rank upon rank upon rank of them, armour bright, banners moving sluggishly in the breeze. There were seven hundred divisions, each hundred commanded by a Marshal in command of Captains and Knights. The Paladins and Armies of Humanity stood before me and I was proud. I addressed them :

" Marshals, Captains, Knights and Warriors of Humanity, you have seen me to be a victorious War Leader."

" Aye !" they roared, jubilant.

" We shall be victorious here and elsewhere in the land of Mernadin. Go now, with caution, and search these houses and buildings for Eldren jackals. Take what booty you desire, but be careful. This city could hide an army, remember."

The divisions marched past us, each taking a different direction. The city received them in its streets, but it did not welcome them.

We found a city of women. Not one Eldren man had remained. We had slain them all at sea.

We took over the palace which had belonged to the dead Warden of Paphanaal.

They brought a girl to us. Black-haired, elfin-faced, her alien features composed against the fear she felt. She had shifting beauty which was always there, but seemed to change with every breath she took. They had torn her garments and bruised her arms and face.

" Erekoze !" Katorn was drunk. He led the party in to the Central Chamber of the Warden's palace where I and the king discussed further campaigns. " Erekoze—Rigenos, my lord King—*look !*"

The King looked at the girl with distaste. " Why should we take interest in an Eldren wanton ? Get hence, Katorn and use her as you will—but be sure to slay her before we leave Paphanaal."

" Why have you brought her, Katorn ?" said I.

Katorn laughed. His thick lips opened wide and he laughed in our faces. " You know not who she is, that's plain."

" Take the Eldren wench away, Katorn," said the king, his voice rising.

" My lord king—this is Ermizhad !"

" What ?" The King leaned forward and stared at the girl.

" Ermizhad, the Wanton of the Ghost Worlds. She's lured

many a mortal to his death so I've heard. She shall die by torture for her lustful crimes. The stake shall have her."

"No, King Rigenos—forget you not that she's Prince Arjavh's *sister*?"

"Of course. You did right, Katorn. Keep her prisoner, keep her safe." He looked at the swaying Captain, noting his drunkenness. "No—enjoy yourself, Katorn. She shall be put in Ereko's charge."

"I accept the charge," I said, taking my chance. I had pity for the girl, whatever terrible crimes she had committed.

"Keep her from harm, Ereko," said the king cynically, eyeing the girl. "Keep her from harm—she'll be a useful piece in our game with Arjavh."

"Take her to my apartments in the East wing," I told the guards, "and make sure she is kept there, unmolested." They took her away.

I understood her usefulness as a hostage, but had not understood the king's reference to the Ghost Worlds. I remembered, then, that once before he had mentioned them.

"The Ghost Worlds?" he said when I questioned him. "Know you not of them, Ereko? Why humankind fear Arjavh's allies so much that they will rarely mention them, in terror of conjuring them up by their words."

"But what are they?"

Rigenos looked around him nervously. "I'll tell you," he said, "but I'm uncomfortable about doing so in this cursed place. The Eldren know better than we what the Ghost Worlds are—we had thought, at first, that you yourself were a prisoner there. They lie beyond Time, beyond Space, linked to this Earth by tenuous bonds." His voice dropped, but he whispered on and I shuddered at what he told me.

"There, on the torn Ghost Worlds, dwell the many-coiled serpents which are the terror and the scourge of the eight dimensions. Here, also, live ghosts and men, those who are man-like and those who are unlike men, those who know their fate which is to live without Time, and those who are unaware of their doom. And there, also, do kinfolk to the Eldren dwell—the halflings."

"But what *are* these worlds?" I asked impatiently.

"They are the worlds to which human sorcerers sometimes go in search of alien wisdom, and from which they draw helpers of horrible powers and disgusting deeds. It is said that within

those worlds an initiate may meet his long-slain comrades who may sometimes help him, his dead loves and kin, and particularly his enemies—those whom he has caused to die. Malevolent enemies with great powers—or wretches who are half-souled and incomplete.”

I was moved to horror by his whispered words, but still curious to know more. “What are they? Where are they?”

“We have no answer to either question. They are worlds full of shadow and gloomy shores upon which drab seas beat. The populace can sometimes be summoned by powerful sorcery to visit this Earth, to haunt, to help or to terrorise. We think that the Eldren came, originally, from these half-worlds if they were not, as our legends say, spawned from the womb of a wicked Queen who gave her hand to Azmobaana in return for immortality—the immortality which her offspring inherited. But the Eldren are material enough, for all their lack of souls, whereas the Ghost Armies are rarely of solid flesh.”

“And why is that girl known as the Wanton of the Ghost Worlds?” I asked.

“It is said that she mates with ghouls,” answered the king, “and in return has special powers over the halflings who are friends with the ghouls. The halflings love her, as far as it is possible for such degenerate creatures to love.”

I could not believe the first part. The girl seemed young, innocent. I said as much.

“How do you tell the age of an immortal?” Rigenos replied. I could not, of course, answer. But I thought much of Ermi-zhad as we went on to talk of the immediate considerations of the war against the Eldren.

We had little clear idea where the rest of the Eldren forces were marshalled. There were four other major cities on the continent of Mernadin. The chief of these was Loos Ptokai which lay near to the Plains of Melting Ice. This was Arjavh’s headquarters and, from what the Eldren on the flagship had said, he was either there now or marching to recapture Paphanaal.

“We must not forget the sorcerous fortresses of the Outer Islands,” Rigenos told me, “at World’s Edge. The Outer Islands lie in the Gateway to the Ghost Worlds and from there they can summon their ghoulish allies. Perhaps, now Papha-

naal is taken, we should concentrate on smashing their strength in the West, at World's Edge."

I wondered if he over-estimated the power of the Ghost World denizens. "Have you ever seen these halflings?" I asked him.

"Oh, yes, my friend," he replied, "I've seen them. You are wrong if you believe them legendary things. They are, in one sense at least, real enough."

He had convinced me. "Very well," I said. "We'll leave a force here strong enough to defend the city, return to Necranal, re-equip the Fleets and make war on the Outer Islands. But how do you plan to use Ermizhad? Will you leave her here or take her back to Necranal?"

"Necranal, I think," he said. "We shall keep her in our principal city until such a time as we need to use her, if ever we have to bargain with Arjavh."

"A sensible plan," I agreed.

"We'll settle our position her," he said, "and set sail back to Necranal within a week. We should waste no time—now that we have gained Paphanaal, we must fear an attack from Prince Arjavh's frightful Ghost Armies."

There were minor details of the plan to discuss and, while the victorious warriors pleased themselves on Eldren bounty, we talked of urgent matters.

It was slower going back to the Two Continents, for our mighty vessels groaned with captured Eldren treasure.

Ermizhad had been begrudgingly given decent quarters next to mine. This was at my request. Although he hated the Eldren still, King Rigenos had exhausted some of the earlier ferocity he had felt in the heat of war. However, he would have nothing to do with her and when he got the opportunity he spoke of Ermizhad in her presence as if she was not there; spoke disdainfully of her and his disgust for all her kind.

I saw a little of her and, in spite of the king's warnings, came to like her. She was certainly the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her beauty was different from the cool beauty of Iolinda, my betrothed.

What is love? Even now, now that the whole pattern of my destiny has been fulfilled, I do not know. Oh, yes, I still loved Iolinda, but I think while I did not know it I was falling in love with Ermizhad. I refused to believe in the stories told about her and held affection for her though, at that time, had no

thought of pursuing it, remaining loyal to Iolinda. But there must be countless forms of love. Which is the form which conquers the rest? I cannot define it. I shall not try.

Ermizhad's beauty had the fascination for being an unhuman beauty, but close enough to my race's ideal to attract me

She had the long pointed Eldren face, slanting eyes that seemed blind in their strange milkeness, slightly pointed ears, high slanting cheekbones and a slender body that was almost boyish. All the Eldren women were slender, like this, small breasted and narrow waisted. Her red lips were fairly wide, curving naturally upwards so that she always seemed to be on the point of smiling while her face was in repose.

For the first week out she would not speak. I saw that she had everything for her comfort and she thanked me through her guards, that was all. But one day I stood outside the set of cabins where she, the king and I had our apartments, leaning over the rail looking at a grey sea and an overcast sky.

She took the initiative.

"Greetings, Sir Champion," She said half-mockingly as she came out of her cabin.

I turned, surprised.

"Greetings—Lady Ermizhad," said I. She was dressed in a cloak of midnight blue flung around a simple smock of pale blue wool.

"A day of omens, I think," she said looking at the gloomy sky which boiled darkly above us, full of heavy greys and dusty yellows.

"Why think you?" said I.

She laughed. It was lovely to hear—crystal and gold-strung harps, the music of heaven, not hell.

"Forgive me, I sought to trouble you, but I see you are not so prone to suggestion as others of your race. In fact," she frowned, "there is an air about you which makes me think you are not wholly of that race."

"I am of it," I told her, "but not from this period of time. I have been many heroes—but always human. How I got here, I do not know. I am not sure where I am, in the far future or the far past."

"That would depend on what period of time you came from," she said. "For we believe that Time moves in a circle, so that the past is the future and the future is the past."

"An interesting theory," I said.

"More than a theory, Lord Erekoze." She came and stood by the ship's rail, one hand resting lightly upon it.

At that time, I felt the affection that I supposed a father might have for a daughter—a father who delights in his offspring's assured innocence. She could not have been, I felt sure, more than nineteen. Yet her voice had a confidence that comes with knowledge of the world, her carriage was proud, also confident. I realised that King Rigenos might well have spoken truly. How, indeed, could you gauge the age of an immortal?

"I have the feeling," I said, "that I come from your past—that this, in relation to what I call the Twentieth Century—is the far future."

"This world is very ancient," she agreed.

"Is there a record of a time when only human beings occupied the Earth?"

"No," she smiled, "there is an echo of a myth, the thread of a legend, which says that there was a time when only the Eldren occupied the Earth. My brother has studied this—I believe he knows more."

I shivered. I did not know why, but my vitals seemed to chill within me. I could not, easily, continue the conversation, though I wanted to. She appeared not to have noticed my discomfort.

At last I said: "A day of omens, madame. I hope to talk with you again some time." I bowed and returned to my cabin.

four

I saw her in the same place the next day. The sky had cleared somewhat and sunlight pushed thick beams through the clouds, the rays slanting down on the choppy sea so that the world seemed half dark, half light. A moody day.

We stood for a while in silence, leaning out over the rail, watching the surf slide by, watching the oars smash into the waters in monotonous rhythm.

Again, she was the first to speak.

"What do they plan to do with me?" she asked quietly.

"You will be a hostage against the eventuality of your brother Prince Arjavh ever attacking Necranal," I told her. "You will be safe—King Rigenos will not be able to bargain if you are not harmed."

She sighed.

"Why did not you and the other Eldren women flee when our fleets put in to Paphanaal?" I asked. This had puzzled me.

"The Eldren do not flee," she said. "They do not flee from cities theirs by right."

"They fled to the Mountains of Sorrow centuries ago," I pointed out.

"No," she shook her head, "they were driven there. There is a difference."

"There is a difference," I agreed.

"Who speaks of difference?" A new, harsher voice broke in. It was Rigenos. He had come out of his cabin silently and stood behind us, feet apart on the swaying deck.

"Greetings, sire," I said. "We were discussing the meaning of words."

"You've become uncommon friendly with the Eldren bitch," he sneered. What was it about a man who had shown himself noble and brave in many ways that when the Eldren were concerned he became an uncouth iconoclast?

"Sire," I pointed out softly, "You speak of one who, though our enemy, is of noble blood."

Again he sneered. "Noble blood! The vile stuff which flows in their polluted veins cannot be termed thus. Beware, Erekoze! I realise that you are not altogether versed in our ways or our knowledge, that your memory is hazy—but remember that the Eldren wanton has a tongue of liquid gold which can beguile you to your doom and ours. Pay no heed to her."

"Sire . . ." I said.

"She'll weave such a spell that you'll be a fawning dog at her mercy and no good to any of us. I tell you, Erekoze, beware. Gods, I've half a mind to give her to the rowers and let them have their way with her."

"You placed her under my protection, king," I said angrily, "and I am sworn to protect her against *all* dangers."

"Fool!" he said. "I have warned you. I do not want to lose your friendship, Erekoze—and more, I do not want to lose our War Champion. If she shows further signs of enchanting you, I shall slay her. No one shall stop me."

"I am doing your work, king," I said, "at your request. But remember *you* this, I am Erekoze, I have been many other Champions. What I do is for the human race. I have taken no

oath of loyalty to you or any other king. I am Erepose, the War Champion—Champion of Humanity, not Rigenos's Champion!"

His eyes narrowed. "Is this treachery, Erepose?"

"No, King Rigenos. Disagreement with a single representative of humanity does not constitute treachery to mankind."

He said nothing, just stood there, seeming to hate me as much as he hated the Eldren girl. His breathing was heavy and rasped in his throat.

"Give me no reason to regret my summoning of thee, dead Erepose," he said at length and turned away, back to his cabin.

"I think we'd best remain apart," said Ermizhad quietly.

"Dead Erepose, eh?" I said and then grinned. "If I'm dead then I'm strangely prone to emotion for a corpse." I made light of our dispute, yet events had taken a turn which caused me to fear that he would not, for one thing, allow me the hand of Iolinda.

Although he warmed somewhat as the journey reached its end, I was still troubled as we sailed up the Droonaa River and came again to Necranal.

As it happened, King Rigenos found himself in no position to refuse me aught. I received such an ovation upon my return, that to go against my wishes would have aroused the wrath of the people against him.

I think he began to see me as a threat to his throne, then, but I was not interested in his crown, only in his daughter.

The king announced our betrothal the next day and the news was received with joy by the citizens of Necranal. We stood before them on the great balcony overlooking the city. We smiled and waved but, when we went inside again, the king left us with a curt word and hurried away.

"Father seems to disapprove of our match," Iolinda said in puzzlement, "in spite of his consent."

"A disagreement about tactics," I comforted her. "He will soon forget."

But, I admitted to myself, I still felt troubled.

Iolinda and I lay together, as was the custom in the Human Kingdoms. But, that first night, we did not make love.

Two days later there came word that what we had sought to avert by taking Paphanaal had actually come to pass.

Eldren ships had beached on the coast of Necralala. An Eldren army was pushing toward Necranal and, it was said, none could stand against it.

The king spoke to me sombrely.

"You must go, Erekoze, and do battle with the Hounds of Evil. Evidently we underestimated their strength. News is that Prince Arjavh leads them. This is our opportunity to strike the head from the monster that is the Eldren."

"I'll take forty divisions of men," I said, "and leave at once."

"Twenty divisions will be enough," he said. "Even then you will outnumber the Eldren horde."

"But surely it is best to be safe," I said.

"Twenty," he said dogmatically, "we'll need the rest in case other attacks have been made from other parts of the coasts. You'll agree that my logic is reasonable?"

"I agree," I nodded, "but this seems, I think, more a question of emotion than logic."

"What do you mean?" His eyes had a half-guilty look.

"Nothing," I said. "I will take twenty divisions. Will you agree to fifteen of those being cavalry?"

"I'll agree to that," he said. "Fifteen cavalry divisions and five infantry. Good luck."

"Thanks," I said.

I rode in my proud armour at the head of my army, my lance flaunting my banner of bronze portcullis on an azure field. It was with seeming sorrow that Iolinda had bade me farewell. Ermizhad had said little when I told her of my mission, but she had been tense.

Well before we met Arjavh's forces, we heard stories of their progress from fleeing villagers. Apparently they were marching doggedly towards Necranal, avoiding any settlements they came to. If I guessed right, the reason for Prince Arjavh being in Necralala was for the purpose of rescuing his sister. I knew little of the Eldren prince save that he was a monster incarnate, a slayer of women and children. I was impatient to meet him in battle. Other stories had told that half his forces were comprised of halflings—things from the Ghost Worlds.

The armies of the Eldren and the forces of Humanity met on a vast plateau surrounded by distant hills. My marshals and captains were all for rushing upon the Eldren immediately, for their numbers were smaller than ours, but I stood by the Code

of War and ordered our herald to the Eldren camp, under a flag of truce. I watched him ride away and then, on an impulse, spurred after him.

He turned in his saddle, hearing the hoof-beats of my horse. "Lord Erekoze?" he said questioningly.

"Ride on, herald—and I'll ride with you."

So together we came to the Eldren camp.

We rode through a silent camp until we came to the simple pavilion of Prince Arjavh.

"I bring a challenge from the hosts of Humanity!" cried the herald.

I heard a movement in the tent and from it stepped a lithe figure, dressed in half-armour, a steel breastplate strapped over a loose shirt of green, leather hose beneath leg greaves, also of steel, and sandals on his feet. His long black hair was kept away from his eyes by a band of gold bearing a single great ruby.

And his face—was beautiful. I hesitate to use the word to describe a man, but it is the only one to do his fine features justice. Like Ermizhad he had the tapering skull, the slanting, orbless eyes, but his lips did not curve upwards as did hers. His mouth was grim and there were lines of weariness about it. He passed his hand across his face and looked up at us.

"I am Prince Arjavh of Mernadin," he said in his liquid voice. "We accept your challenge."

"Shall we decide the terms of the battle?" I asked softly.

He looked at me, puzzled, then his face cleared. "Greetings, Erekoze," he said.

"How do you know my name?"

He smiled a smile full of melancholy irony.

"Our scientists are skilful men," he said. "But why do you come, thus, with your herald?"

"Curiosity," I said. "I have spoke much with your sister, Ermizhad."

"How is she?" he asked quickly.

"Well," I said, "she was placed under my protection."

"I am relieved," he said. "We come, of course, to rescue her."

"That is what I supposed. Now, shall we discuss the terms of the battle?"

"It has been a million years since the Eldren and Humanity agreed on terms—extermination of every warrior is the usual rule, now."

"Well that rule has been changed," I said impatiently.
"Come, are you prepared?"

"Deliverance of the wounded to their own side," he said.

"Agreed."

"No slaying of prisoners taken in battle—the winner releasing his captives."

"Agreed."

"Deliverance of Ermizhad from captivity if we shall win."

"To that I cannot agree. The king holds her. If you win, you must go on to Necranal and lay siege to the city."

He sighed. "Very well, Sir Champion. We shall be ready at dawn tomorrow."

I said hurriedly: "We outnumber you, Prince Arjavh—you could go back now, in peace."

He shook his head. "Let the battle be fought," he said.

"Until dawn, then, Prince Arjavh."

He moved his hand tiredly in assent and nodded. "Farewell, Lord Erekoze."

"Farewell." I wheeled my horse and rode back to our camp in a sorrowful mood.

As the watery dawn broke, our forces advanced towards each other. Very slowly, it seemed, but implacably.

A flight of swallows flew high above us and glided away towards the far off hills.

I smelled the stink of sweating men and horses, heard the creak of harness and the clash of metal. Because of the necessity for speed, we had brought no cannon and neither, it appeared, had the Eldren. Perhaps, I thought, their siege machines were following behind at a slower pace.

I had planned to depend upon my cavalry spreading out on two sides to surround the Eldren while another arrow-head of cavalry pierced the centre of their ranks and pushed through to the rear so that we would surround them on all sides.

As we came close I gave the order for the archers to shoot. We had no longbows, only crossbows which had a greater range and penetrating power. The first flight of arrows screamed overhead and thudded down into the Eldren ranks.

Our bolts were answered by the slim arrows of the Eldren. Horses and men shrieked as arrows found their marks and for a moment there was consternation in our ranks as they became ragged and then, with discipline, re-formed. I drew my sword.

"Cavalry—charge!"

The knights spurred their war-steeds forward and began, line upon line of them, to fan out on two sides while another division rode straight towards the centre of the Eldren host. They were bent over the necks of their fast-moving horses, lances leaning at an angle across their saddles, aimed at the Eldren.

Their multi-coloured plumes streamed behind them and the dim sunlight gleamed on their armour. I was almost deafened by the thunder of hooves as I kicked my charger into a gallop and with a band of fifty picked knights behind me, surrounding the twin standards of humanity, rode forward, straining my eyes for Arjavh whom, at that moment, I hated with a hate akin to jealousy.

With a fearful din of shouts and clashing metal we smashed into the Eldren army and soon I was oblivious of all but the need to kill and defend my life.

I hewed about me with savage intensity, seeking sight of Arjavh. At last I saw him, a huge mace swinging from his gauntleted hand, battering at the infantrymen who sought to pull him from his saddle.

"Arjavh !"

He heard but paid no attention, intent as he was on defending himself.

"Arjavh !"

"A moment, Erekoze, I have work here."

He kicked his horse towards me, still flailing around him with the giant mace. Then the infantrymen drew back as they saw we were about to engage. I aimed a mighty blow at him but he pulled aside in time and I felt his mace glance off my back as I leaned so far forward in my saddle after the wasted blow that my sword almost touched the churned ground.

I brought the sword up in an under-arm swing and the mace was there to deflect it. For several minutes we fought until, in my astonishment, I heard a voice some distance away. "Rally the standard ! Rally Knights of Humanity !"

We had not succeeded in our tactics, that was obvious. Our forces were attempting to re-consolidate and attack afresh. Arjavh smiled and lowered his mace. "They sought to surround the halfings," he said and laughed aloud.

"We'll meet again, soon, Arjavh," I shouted as I turned my horse back and forced my way through milling, embattled men towards the standard which swayed to my right. There was no cowardice in my leaving and Arjavh knew it. I had to be with my men when they rallied.

five

Arjavh had mentioned the halflings. What were they? What kind of creatures were they that they could not, as he had inferred, be surrounded?

The halflings were only part of my problem. Fresh tactics had to be decided upon hurriedly, or the day would be soon lost. Four of my marshals were desperately trying to get our ranks closed as I came up. The Eldren enclosed us and many groups of humans were cut off from our main body.

"What's the position?" I shouted above the noise of battle.

"It's hard to tell, Lord Erekoze. One moment we had surrounded the Eldren and the next moment half their forces were surrounding us—they vanished and reappeared behind us! Even now we cannot tell which is material Eldren and which halfling." The man who answered me was Count Roldero, an experienced Marshal. His voice was ragged and he was very much shaken.

"What other qualities do these halflings possess?"

"They are solid enough when fighting, Lord Erekoze, and can be slain, but they can disappear at will and be wherever they wish on the field. It is impossible to plan tactics against such a foe."

"In that case," I decided, "you had best keep your men together and fight a defensive action. I think we still outnumber the Eldren and their ghostly allies. Let them come to us!"

I could see that the morale of my warriors was bad; they had been disconcerted and were finding it difficult to face the idea of defeat since victory had, at first, seemed so certain.

Through the milling men I saw the basilisk banner of the Eldren approaching as their cavalry moved speedily towards us, Arjavh at their head. Our forces came, again, together and once more I was doing battle with the Eldren prince.

He knew the power of my sword, knew that the touch of it could slay him, but that deadly mace, wielded like a sword, warded off every blow I made. I fought him for half-an-hour until he showed signs of sweating weariness and my muscles ached horribly.

And again our forces had been split, again it was impossible to tell how the battle went for us. For most of the time I was uncaring, oblivious of the events around me as I concentrated on breaking through Arjavh's splendid guard.

Then I saw Count Roldero ride swiftly past me, his golden armour split, his face and arms bloody. In one red hand he carried the torn banner of Humanity and his eyes stared out of his wounded head in fear. "Flee, Lord Erekoze," he shouted as he galloped past. "Flee—the day is lost!"

I could not believe it, until the ragged remnants of my warriors began to stream past me in ignominious flight.

"Rally Humanity!" I screamed. "Rally!" But they paid me no heed. Again Arjavh dropped his mace to his side.

"You are defeated," he said. "You are a worthy foe, Erekoze, and I remember our battle terms—go in peace. Necranal will have need of you."

I shook my head slowly and drew a heavy breath. "Prepare to defend yourself, Prince Arjavh," I said.

He shrugged, swiftly brought up the mace against the blow I aimed at him and then brought it down suddenly upon my metal-gauntleted wrist. My whole arm went numb. I tried to cling to the sword, but my fingers would not respond. It dropped from my hand and hung by a thong from my wrist.

With a curse, I flung myself from my saddle straight at him, my good hand grasping, but he turned his horse aside and I fell, face forward, in the bloody mud of the field. I attempted once to rise, failed, and lost consciousness.

I shivered, aware that I was no longer clad in my armour. I looked up. Arjavh stood over me.

"I wonder why he hates me," he said to himself before he realised I was awake. His expression altered and he gave a light smile. "You're a ferocious one, Sir Champion."

"My warriors," I said, "what . . .?"

"Those that were left have fled. We released the few prisoners we had and sent them after their comrades. Those were the terms, I believe?"

I struggled up. "Then you are going to release me?"

"I suppose so. Although . . ."

"Although?"

"You would be a useful bargaining prisoner."

I took his meaning and relaxed, sinking back on to the hard bed. I thought deeply and fought the idea which came to me, but it grew too large in me. At length I said, almost against my will: "Trade me for Ermizhad."

His cool eyes showed surprise for an instant.

"You would suggest that? But Ermizhad is Humanity's chief hostage."

"Damn you, Eldren—I said trade me for her."

"You're a strange human, my friend. But with your permission granted, that is what I shall do. I thank you."

He left the tent. I heard him instructing a messenger.

"Make sure the people know," I shouted from the bed, "The king may not agree, but the people will force his hand."

Arjavh instructed the messenger accordingly. He came back.

"It puzzles me," I said at length as he sat on a bench on the other side of the tent, "It puzzles me that the Eldren have not conquered Humanity before now—with those halfling warriors I should think you'd be invincible."

He shook his head. "We rarely make use of our allies," he said. "But I was desperate. You can understand that I was prepared to go almost to any measures to rescue my sister."

"I can," I told him.

"We would never have invaded," he continued, "had it not been for her." It was said so simply that I believed him. Either his cunning was so great that I was completely deceived, or else he spoke truth.

"What are the halflings?" I asked him.

Again he smiled: "Sorcerous ghouls," he said.

"That is what King Rigenos told me—it is no explanation."

"What if I told you they were capable of breaking up their atomic structure at will and assembling again in another place. You would not understand me—sorcery, you would say."

I was surprised at the scientific nature of his explanation. "I would understand you better," I said slowly.

He raised his slanting eyebrows.

"You *are* different," he said. "Well, the halflings, as you have seen, are related to the Eldren. Not all the dwellers on the Ghost Worlds are our kin—some are closer related to men, and there are other, baser, forms of life, too . . .

"The Ghost Worlds are solid enough, but exist in an alternate series of dimensions to our own. On these worlds, the halflings have no special powers—no more than we have—but here they have. We do not know why. On Earth—different laws seem to apply to them. More than a million years ago we discovered a means of bridging the dimensions between Earth and these other worlds. We found a race akin to our own who

will, at times, come to our aid if our need is especially great. This was one of those times. Sometimes, however, the bridge ceases to exist when the Ghost Worlds move into another phase of their weird orbit, so that any halflings on Earth cannot return and any of our people are in the same position if on the Ghost Worlds. Therefore, you will understand, it is dangerous to stay on either side overlong."

"Is it possible," I asked, "that the Eldren came originally from these Ghost Worlds?"

"I suppose it is possible," he agreed. "There are no records."

"Perhaps that is why the humans hate you as aliens," I suggested.

"That is not the reason," he told me, "for the Eldren occupied the Earth for ages before humankind ever came to the planet."

"What?"

"It is true," he said. "I am an immortal and my grandfather was an immortal. He was slain during the first wars between the Eldren and Humanity. When the humans came to Earth, they had incredible weapons of terrible destructive potential. In those days we also used such weapons. The wars created such destruction that the Earth seemed like a blackened ball of mud when the wars were ended and the Eldren defeated. Such was the destruction that we swore never again to use our weapons, whether we were threatened with extermination or not. We could not assume the responsibility for destroying an entire planet."

"You mean you still have these weapons?"

"They are locked away, yes."

"And you have the knowledge to use them?"

"Of course—we are immortal, we have many people who fought in those ancient wars, some even built new weapons before our decision was made."

"Then why . . .?"

"I have told you—we swore not to."

"What happened to the humans' weapons—and their knowledge of them? Did they make the same decision?"

"No. The human race degenerated for a while—wars between themselves occurred, at one time they almost wiped themselves out, at another they were barbarians, and at another

they seemed to have matured at last, to be at peace with themselves and one another. At one stage they lost the knowledge and the remaining weapons. In the last million years they have climbed back from absolute savagery—the peaceful years were short, a false lull—and I'd predict they'll sink back soon enough. They seem bent on self-destruction as well as ours. We have wondered if the humans who must surely exist on other planets than this are the same. Perhaps not."

"I hope not," I said. "How do you think the Eldren will fare against the humans?"

"Badly," he said. "Particularly since they are inspired by your leadership and the gateway to the Ghost Worlds is due soon to close again. Previously Humanity was split by quarrels. King Rigenos could never get his marshals to agree and he was too uncertain of himself to make decisions. But you have made decisions for him and the marshals. You shall win."

"You are a fatalist," I said.

"I am a realist," he said.

"Could not peace terms be arranged?"

He shook his head. "What use is it to talk?" he asked me bitterly. "You humans, I pity you. Why will you always identify our motives with your own? We do not seek power—only peace—peace. But that, I suppose, this planet shall never have until Humanity dies of old age."

I stayed with Arjavh for another day before he released me, on trust, and I rode back expecting, when I arrived, to find Ermizhad gone. But she was not. She was still in captivity. On learning this I visited her in her chambers.

"Ermizhad—you were to be traded for me, those were the terms. Where is the king? Why has he not kept his word?"

"I knew nothing of this," she said. "I did not know Arjavh was so close, otherwise . . ."

I interrupted her. "Come with me. We'll see the king and get you on your journey home."

I found the king and Katorn in the king's private chambers. I burst in upon them. "King Rigenos, what is the meaning of this? My word was given to Arjavh that Ermizhad was to leave here freely upon my release. He allowed me to leave his camp on trust and now I return to find the Lady Ermizhad still in captivity. I demand that she be released immediately."

The king and Katorn laughed at me. "Fool," said Katorn. "Who needs to keep his word to an Eldren jackal? Now we have our War Champion back and still retain our chief hostage. Forget it, Erekoze, my friend, there is no need to regard the Eldren as humans."

"You refuse to release her, then?" I said grimly.

Ermizhad smiled. "Do not worry, Erekoze. I have other friends." She closed her eyes and began to croon. At first the words came softly, but their volume rose until she was giving voice to a weird series of verbal harmonies.

Katorn jumped forward, dragging out his sword. "Sorcery! The bitch invokes her demon kind." I drew my own sword and held it warningly in front of me, protecting Ermizhad. I had no idea what she was doing, but I was going to give her the chance, now, to do whatever she wanted.

Her voice stopped abruptly. Then she cried: "Brethren! Brethren of the Ghost Worlds—aid me!"

Quite suddenly there materialised in the chamber some dozen or so Eldren, their faces but slightly different from others I had seen. I recognised them as halflings.

"There!" shouted Rigenos. "Evil sorcery. She is a witch—I told you."

"If that is the extent of her sorcery," I said, "then her brethren shall, indeed, aid her to return."

The halflings were silent. They surrounded Ermizhad until all their bodies touched her's and one another's. Then Ermizhad shouted; "Away, brethren—back to the camps of the Eldren!"

Their forms began to flicker so that they seemed half in our dimensions, half in some other. "Goodbye, Erekoze," she cried, "I hope we shall meet in happier circumstances."

"I hope so," I shouted back—and then she vanished.

"Traitor," cursed King Rigenos. "You aided her escape!"

"You should die by torture," added Katorn, thwarted.

"I'm no traitor, as well you know," I said evenly. "You are traitors—traitors to your words. You have no case against me."

They could not answer. I turned and left the chamber, seeking out Iolinda.

I found her in our apartments and I kissed her, needing at that moment a woman's friendly sympathy, but I seemed to meet a block. She was not, it seemed, prepared to give me help, although she kissed me. At length, I ceased to embrace her and stood back a little, looking into her eyes.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked her.

"No—why should there be? You are safe. I had feared you dead."

Was it me, then? Was it . . . ? I pushed the thought from me. But can a man force himself to love a woman? Can he love two women at the same time? I was desperately clinging to the strands of the love I had felt for her when first we met.

"Ermizhad is safe," I blurted, "she called her halfling brothers to her aid and, when she returns to the Eldren camp, Arjavh will take his forces back to Mernadin. The threat of attack on Necranal has been averted. You should be pleased."

"I am," she said, and then: "And you are pleased, no doubt, that our hostage escaped!"

"What do you mean?"

"My father told me how you'd been enchanted by her wanton sorcery. You seemed to be more anxious for her safety than ours."

"That is foolish talk!"

"Is it? I think he spoke true, Erekoze," she said, her voice subdued now. She turned from me.

"Iolinda, I will prove how I love you—I swear I shall kill all the Eldren."

"Including Prince Arjavh—and his sister?"

"Including them," I said after a moment.

"I will see you later" she said as she glided swiftly from the room. I unstrapped my sword and flung it savagely on to the floor. I spent the next few hours fighting my own agony of spirit.

In the month we spent preparing for the great war against the Eldren, I saw but little of my betrothed and, finally, ceased to seek her out but concentrated on the plans for the campaigns we intended to fight.

I developed the strictly controlled mind of the soldier, allowing no emotion, whether it was love or hate, to dominate me. I became strong—and in my strength, virtually inhuman. I knew people remarked upon it—but they saw in me the qualities of a great battle leader and although all avoided my company, socially, they were glad that Erekoze led them.

We sailed, eventually, for the Outer Islands at World's Edge the Gateway to the Ghost Worlds.

It was a long and arduous sailing, that one, before we sighted the bleak cliffs of the Islands and prepared ourselves for the invasion.

We found naught but a few handfuls of Eldren whom we slew. Their towns were all but deserted and of halflings there was none. We ripped the towns apart, burning and pillaging, torturing Eldren to elicit the meaning of this, though secretly I knew it. We were possessed of a dampening sense of anticlimax and although we left no building standing, no Eldren alive, we could not rid ourselves of the idea that we had been thwarted in some way. The Eldren had said that the Gateway was closed. I did not want to believe them, but they would not say otherwise.

When our work was done in the Outer Islands, we sailed abruptly for the continent of Mernadin, put into Paphanaal which was still held by our forces, landed our troops and pushed outwards in victorious conquest.

It seemed that no Eldren fortress could withstand our grim thrustings into their territory.

It was a year of fire and steel and Mernadin seemed at times to be a sea of smoke and blood. We were all incredibly tired, but the spirit of slaughter was in us, giving us a terrible vitality and everywhere that the banners of Humanity met the standards of the Eldren, the basilisk standards were torn down and trampled.

We put all we found to the sword. We punished deserters in our own ranks mercilessly, we flogged our troops to greater endurance.

Towns burned behind us, cities fell and were torn, stone by stone, to the ground. Eldren corpses littered the countryside and our camp-followers were carrion birds and jackals.

A year of bloodshed. A year of hate. If I could not force myself to love, then I could force myself to hate, and this I did. All feared me, humans and Eldren alike as I turned beautiful Mernadin into a funeral pyre for my own terrible bewilderment and grief.

The king was slain that year and Iolinda was declared Queen. But the king had become a puppet of authority—for humanity followed a grimmer conqueror whom they regarded with awe. Dead Erekoze, they called me, the vengeful sword of Humanity.

I did not care what they called me—Reaver, Blood-letter, Berserker—for my goal came closer until it was the last fortress of the Eldren undefeated. I dragged my armies behind me as if by a rope. I dragged them towards the principal city of Mernadin, by the Plains of Melting Ice. Arjavh's capital—Loos Ptokai.

At last we saw its looming towers silhouetted against a red evening sky. Of marble and black granite, it rose mighty and seemingly invulnerable above us. But I knew we should take it. I had Arjavh's word for it, after all—he had told me we should win.

At dawn the next day, my features cold as stone, I rode beneath my banner as I had ridden, a year before, into the camp of the Eldren, with my herald at my side. He raised his golden trumpet to his lips and blew an eerie blast upon it which echoed among the black and white towers of Loos Ptokai.

"Eldren prince !" I yelled. "Arjavh of Mernadin, we are here to slay thee !"

On the battlements over the great main gate, I saw Arjavh appear. He looked down at me, sadness in his eyes.

"Greetings, old enemy," he called. "You will have a long siege before you break this, the last of our strength."

"So be it," I said, "but break it we shall."

"Before the battle commences," he said, "I invite you to enter Loos Ptokai as my guest and refresh yourself. You seem in need of refreshment."

My herald sneered. "They became ingenuous in their defeat if they think they can take you with such a simple trick, my lord."

"Be silent," I ordered, my mind a battleground of conflicting thoughts and emotions. I took a deep breath.

"I accept, Prince Arjavh," I said hollowly, and added : "Is the Lady Ermizhad therein ?"

"She is, and looks forward to seeing you." There was an edge on Arjavh's voice as he answered his last question. He loved her, I knew, and perhaps was aware of my own affection for her. Aware of it though, at that time, I was not. It was that, of course, which contributed to my decision to enter Loos Ptokai.

The herald said in astonishment : "My lord, surely you cannot be serious. Once inside the gates you will be slain. There were stories, once, that you and Arjavh were not on

unfriendly terms, for enemies, but after the havoc you have caused in Mernadin, he will kill you immediately."

I shook my head in a new and quieter mood. "I think not," I said, and all the ferocity, the hate, the mad battle-anger, seemed to swell out of me leaving me, as I turned away from the herald so he should not see, with tears in my eyes.

"Open your gates, Prince Arjavh," I called in shaking tones which I could not control. "I come to Loos Ptokai as your guest."

I rode my horse slowly into the city, having left my sword and lance behind me. The herald, in astonishment, was galloping back to our own camp to give the news to the marshals.

The streets of Loos Ptokai were silent, as if in mourning, as Arjavh came down the steps from the battlements to greet me. I saw, now that he was closer, that he, too, wore the expression which showed upon my own harsh face. His step was not so lithe and his voice not quite so lilting as when we had first met a year before.

I dismounted. He gripped my hand.

"So," he said in attempted gaiety, "the barbarian battle-monger is still material. My people had begun to doubt it."

"I suppose they hate me," I said.

He seemed a little surprised. "The Eldren cannot hate," he said as he led me towards the palace wherein he had residence.

I was shown by Arjavh to a small room containing a bed, a table and a chair of wonderful workmanship. In one corner was a sunken bath, water already steaming in it. After he had left, I stripped off my blood- and dust-encrusted clothing and sank gratefully into the water.

After the initial emotional shock I had received when Arjavh had given his invitation, my mind was now numbed and, for the first time in a year, I relaxed, mentally and physically, washing all the grief and hatred from me as I washed my body.

I was almost cheerful as I donned the fresh clothes which had been laid out for me and, when someone knocked at my door, called lightly for them to enter.

"Hello, Erekoze." Ermizhad stood there.

"My lady," I returned, bowing slightly.

"How are you?"

"Better," I said, "for your hospitality."

"Arjavh sent me to take you to dinner."

"I am ready. But first tell me how you have fared."

"Well enough—in health," said she. She came closer.

"And tell me—are you wed now to Queen Iolinda?"

"We are still betrothed," I told her, looking into her eyes.

"We are to be married when . . ."

"When?"

"When Loos Ptokai is taken," I said quickly and then stepped towards her so that we were separated by less than an inch. "Could not the Eldren admit defeat, Ermizhad. Could they not acknowledge mankind's victory?"

"To what purpose—they say you swore to slay us all?"

"Forget that—let peace ensue between our peoples."

She shook her head. "For all your bloody conquests, Erekoze, you still do not understand the people you serve. Your race will only be satisfied when every Eldren has perished."

I knew the people I led. She was right.

"I could still try to convince them," I said lamely.

"Thanks for that," she said. "Come—the meal awaits." She paused, frowning, then: "No—they'll hold you to your vow."

At dinner, Ermizhad and I sat close together and we all spoke gaily, the wit flowed and we succeeded in driving away the knowledge of the forthcoming battle. But as Ermizhad and I talked softly to one another, I caught a look of pain in Arjavh's eyes and for a moment he was quiet. He broke through our conversation suddenly:

"You spoke earlier of peace, Erekoze. Is there any chance of arranging peace terms?"

"A conditional surrender on your part?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

"I am in a difficult position, Arjavh, as you know. Technically I am the War Leader of Humanity and will have no power when the war is ended. The new Queen, Iolinda, is the ruler of Humanity and only upon her decision can the war be ended by debate. There is also the consideration of the people and the warriors who have been so inflamed against the Eldren that even if the Queen declared peace, they might force her to continue the war. Victory is certain, that you know, but, for my part, I should welcome peace."

"That is what I thought," he waved his hand tiredly, "there can be no peace."

"I told Ermizhad that I would strive to convince the Queen and the people that peace is desirable. I'll return to Necranal and see what I can do to show her that you offer no threat to our race."

"You trust us inordinately," smiled Ermizhad. "We are known for our smooth-tongued cunning. We may be beguiling you."

"If that is the case," I said, "the results will not be on my conscience. And the Gods know I have enough already."

"We are reputed to be soulless, Erekoze—bereft, in fact, of consciences."

I shrugged.

There was still the chance that the Eldren were fooling me into suing for peace on their part, but now that the battle-madness was gone from me, now that Iolinda was so far away that she felt what seemed no longer important, I had become tired of conflict and wanted only peace. I did not want to complete my vow and exterminate the Eldren. How could I?

I would try what I could to bring peace to the wasted land of Mernadin. If the Eldren abused my attempts, I did not know what I should do. I did not think they would.

I spent more than a day with Arjavh and Ermizhad until eventually our herald, accompanied by several marshals, presented himself again outside the gates of Loos Ptokai.

"We fear that you have been guilty of treachery!" called the herald. "Let us see our master—or his body. Then we shall know what to do."

Arjavh and I mounted the steps to the battlements and I saw relief in the eyes of the herald and marshals as they noted I was unharmed.

"I have been talking with Prince Arjavh," I said, "in an attempt to discuss peace terms. I'll join you within the hour."

"Peace terms, Lord Erekoze! *Peace!*"

"Yes," I said, "peace. Now go back. Tell the warriors that I am safe."

"We can take this city, Lord Erekoze," Count Roldero spoke, "there is no need to talk of peace. We can destroy the Eldren once and for all. Have you succumbed to their cursed enchantments—have they beguiled you with smooth words?"

"No," I said, "it was I who suggested it."

Roldero swung his horse around in disgust.

"Peace!" he spat as he and his comrades headed back to the camp. "Our master's gone mad."

"Difficulties already," said Arjavh to me.

"They fear me," I told him, "and they'll obey me—for a while at least."

"Let us hope so," he said.

This time there were no cheering crowds in Necranal to welcome me, for news of my mission had gone ahead of me. The people disapproved.

Her new power had given Iolinda a haughty look as she strode about the throne room, awaiting me.

"Well, Erekoze," she said, "I know why you are here—why you have forsaken your troops, gone against your word to destroy every Eldren."

"Iolinda," I said urgently. "I am convinced that the Eldren are weary of war—that they never intended to threaten the Two Continents in the first place. They want only peace."

"Peace we shall have—when the Eldren race has perished," she cried.

"Iolinda, if you love me, you will listen to me, at least."

"If I love *you*. And what of the Lord Erekoze—does he still love his Queen?"

I was taken aback. I gaped. I could think of nothing to say—nothing but one word, for then I realised that the reason for my bitterness through the year had not been her lack of response to my love—but my lack of response to hers. That word, of course, was 'No.' But I did not utter it.

"Oh, Erekoze," her tone softened. "Can it be true?" There were tears in her eyes.

"No," I said thickly. "I—I still love you, Iolinda. We are to be married . . ." But she knew. However, if peace was to be the result, then I was prepared to marry her in spite of anything I personally felt.

"I still want to marry you, Iolinda," I said.

"No," she sighed, "No you don't."

"I will," I said. "I will. If peace with the Eldren comes about . . ."

Again her wide eyes blazed. "Not on those terms, Erekoze. Never. You are guilty of High Treason against us. The people already speak of you as a traitor."

"But I conquered all of Mernadin for them—all but Loos Ptokai."

"All but Loos Ptokai—where your wanton Eldren bitch awaits you."

"Iolinda—you are unfair."

She was unfair—but, to some degree, she spoke from knowledge of my true position.

"And you are a traitor! Guards!" She called and, as if they had already been told what to do, a dozen of the Imperial Guards rushed in, led by their Captain, Katorn. There was a hint of triumph in his eyes and then, at once, I knew why we had never liked one another—he desired Iolinda!

It was instinctive knowledge—but I knew then that whether I drew my sword or not he would slay me.

I drew my sword.

"Take him, Katorn!" cried Iolinda. "Take him—alive or dead, he is a traitor to his kind!"

"It's untrue," I said, as Katorn advanced cautiously, his men spreading out behind him. I backed to a wall, near a window. The throne room was on the first storey of the palace. Outside were the private gardens of the Queen. "Think, Iolinda—retract your command. You are driven by jealousy. I'm no traitor."

"Slay him, Katorn!"

But I slew Katorn. As he came rushing at me, my sword flicked across his face. He screamed, staggered, his hands rushed up to his head and then he toppled in his golden armour, toppled and fell with a crash to the ground.

The other guards came on, but more warily. I fought off their blades, slew a couple, drove the others back, glimpsed Iolinda watching me, leapt to the sill of the window.

"Goodbye, Queen. You have lost your Champion now." I jumped.

I landed in a rose-bush that ripped at my skin, broke free and ran hastily towards the gate of the garden, the guards behind me.

I tore the gate open and found myself in a deserted alley. I ran down the twisting streets of Necranal with the guards in pursuit, their ranks joined by a howling pack of the townspeople who had no idea why I was wanted. They chased me for the sheer animal pleasure of the hunt.

I ran blindly at first, and then towards the river. My crew, I hoped, still retained their loyalty to me. If they did there was a faint chance of escape. I gained the ship just before my pursuers. I leaped aboard screaming :

“ Prepare to sail ! ”

Only half the crew was aboard, the others were on shore leave, but these hurriedly shipped out the oars while we held the guards and the citizens at bay. We shoved off and began a hasty flight down the Droonaa River.

It was some time before they managed to commandeer a ship for pursuit and by that time we were safely outdistancing them. My crew asked no questions. They were used to my silences, my actions which sometimes seemed peculiar but, a week after we were on course over the sea, bound for Mernadin, I told them briefly that I was now an outlaw.

“ Why, Lord Erekoze ? ” asked my Captain.

“ The Queen’s malice, ” I said, “ and, I suspect, Katorn of the Imperial Guard spoke against me, turning her to hate me. ”

They were satisfied with the explanation and, when we put in at a small cove near the Plains of Melting Ice, I bade them farewell, mounted my horse and rode swiftly for Loos Ptokai, knowing not what I should do when I get there, only that I must let Arjavh know the turn events had taken.

Two months passed, two ominous months in Loos Ptokai, while we wondered what Iolinda should do. Having no leader, the armies of mankind remained surrounding the city but not attacking it. The inaction was oppressive in itself. I became irritable at times, but there were days of happiness with Ermizhad. We openly acknowledged our love now.

I queried Arjavh about the terrible weapons of which he had spoken while I was his prisoner.

“ Use them this once, Arjavh, ” I told him. “ Make a show of strength, that is all. They will be ready to discuss peace, then. ”

“ No, ” he refused. “ No. I do not think even this emergency merits such an action. ”

“ Arjavh, ” I said, “ I respect the reason you have for refusing to use the weapons, but I have grown to love the Eldren. I love them more, evidently, than they love themselves. My own race would suffer from your weapons. If the time

comes when I feel we could use them, will you let me decide—take the decision away from you ?”

“ Perhaps ” he said.

“ Arjavh—will you ?”

“ We Eldren have never been motivated by self-interest to the extent of destroying another race, Erekoze. Do not confuse our values with those of mankind.”

“ I am not,” I replied. “ That is my reason for asking you this. I could not bear to see such a noble race perish at the hand of one which is, in taking this action against you, *ignoble* !”

“ Iolinda spoke truth,” he said quietly. “ You are a traitor to your race.”

“ I seek only to stop them from continuing in their folly.”

He pursed his lips.

“ For the love I have for Ermizhad and the love she has for me. For you and all the Eldren left alive, I ask you to let me take the decision if it becomes necessary.”

“ For Ermizhad ?” He raised his eyebrows. “ Very well, my friend,” he said quickly. “ Very well—I leave the decision to you. I suppose that is fair. But remember—do not act as unwisely as others of your kind.”

“ I will not,” I promised.

s e v e n

After much bickering among themselves, I subsequently learned, the marshals had elected one of themselves, the most experienced, to act as their War Champion. They elected Count Roldero. The siege commenced in earnest.

The massive siege engines were brought forward, giant cannon boomed their solid shot against the trembling walls of Loos Ptokai, blazing fireballs screamed into the city, thousands of arrows followed them in black showers—and a million men came against our handful.

But Loos Ptokai, the ancient capital of Mernadin, Loos Ptokai held firm during those first days.

Wave upon wave of yelling warriors mounted the siege towers and we replied with arrows, with molten metal and with the fire-spewing silver cannon of the Eldren. We fought bravely, Arjavh and I leading the defenders and, whenever they

sighted me, the warriors of Humanity screamed for vengeance and died striving for the privilege of slaying me.

We fought side by side, like brothers, Arjavh and I, but our Eldren warriors were tiring and, after a week of constant barrage, we began to realise that we could not hold against the enemy for more than another week.

During one of the rare lulls in the fighting, I told Arjavh of my decision.

"Break out your weapons," I said, "and arm the Eldren."

He made no remonstrations. "Very well," he said. "I agreed that you would decide. And I know that we are lost if we do not show Humanity our real strength. Very well, they shall be ready for use tomorrow."

I only hoped that he had not overestimated their power.

The next day I was taken by Arjavh to the vaults which lay within the core of the city. We moved along bare corridors of polished black marble, lighted by small bulbs which burned with a greenish light. We came to a door of dark metal and he pressed a stud beside it. The door moved open and we entered an elevator which bore us yet further downwards.

We stepped out into a great hall full of weirdly-wrought machines that looked brand new. They stretched for nearly half-a-mile ahead of us.

"There are the weapons," said Arjavh hollowly.

Around the high walls were arranged hand-guns of various kinds, rifles and things that looked like bazookas. There were squat machines on treads, like ultra-streamlined tanks, with glass-cabins and couches for a single man to lie flat upon and operate the controls. I saw no flying machines of any kind, however. I asked Arjavh about this.

"Flying machines ! It would be interesting if there were such things. We have never, in all our history, been able to develop a machine that will safely stay in the air for any length of time."

I was amazed at this strange gap in their technology, but did not comment upon it.

"Are you still decided to use them ?" he asked me, thinking perhaps that the sight of them would shock me out of my decision.

But these things were not so very different to similar war machines of the age from which, eighteen months before, I had come. I nodded my head.

We returned to the surface and there instructed our warriors to bring the weapons up.

Already I half-doubted my own decision, but felt, as always, that I had to act as I thought best, not as my emotions told me to act.

The weapons were raised. The men were armed. The larger machines were mounted upon the walls. I sent a messenger under a flag of truce to tell the marshals to assemble, the next day, before the walls of Loos Ptokai.

They came, in all their proud panoply of war, which seemed so insignificant, now, against the power of our energy weapons.

We had set one of the new cannon pointing up into the sky so that we could demonstrate its fearful potential.

"We offer you a truce—and peace," I said.

Roldero laughed aloud. "*You* offer us peace, traitor! You should be begging for peace—though you'll get none."

"I warn you Count Roldero," I shouted. "I warn you all. We have fresh weapons—weapons which once came near to destroying this whole Earth! *Watch!*"

I gave the order to fire the giant cannon.

An Eldren warrior depressed a stud on the controls.

There came a humming from the cannon and all at once a tremendous blinding bolt of golden energy gouted from its snout. The heat alone blistered our skins and we fell back shielding our eyes.

Horses shrieked and reared. The marshals' faces were grey and their mouths gaped. They fought to control their mounts.

"That is what we offer you if you will not have peace!" I shouted. "We have a dozen like it and hand-cannon which can kill a hundred men at a sweep. What say you now?"

"We fight—we fight assured of your evil pact with Azmo-baana. We are pledged to wage war on sorcery—and what better example of sorcery is there than that—that . . .?" He was lost for a word to describe our cannon.

"It is not sorcery, foolish Count Roldero," I cried desperately. "It is science—a more developed science than that which invented powder and cannon, that is all. Your own ancestors once had weapons like these!"

"Sorcery! Black sorcery!" he shouted and wheeled his horse away with his main fleeing behind him, back to gather his forces, I knew.

They came and we met them. They were helpless against our weapons. Energy spouted from the guns and scared into their ranks. We all felt pain as we fired the howling waves of force which swept across them and destroyed them, turning proud men and beasts to blackened rubble.

I pitied them as they came on, the cream of Humanity's menfolk.

It took an hour to destroy a million warriors.

One hour.

When the extermination was over, I was filled with a strange emotion which I could not then, and cannot now, define. It was a mixture of grief and triumph. And it was then that I made my final decision—or did I, indeed, make it at all?

Was I right?

In spite of Arjavh's constant antagonism to my plan, I ordered the machines out of Loos Ptokai and, mounted in one of them, ordered them overland.

Two months before I had been responsible for winning the cities of Mernadin for Humanity. Now I reclaimed them in the name of the Eldren.

I reclaimed them in a terrible way. I destroyed every human being occupying them. A week and we were at Paphanaal, the fleets of mankind at anchor in the great harbour. I destroyed those fleets as I destroyed the garrison, men, women and children perished.

And then, for the machines were amphibious, I led the Eldren across the sea to the Two Continents.

Noonos of the jewel-studded towers fell. Tarkar fell. The wondrous cities of the wheatlands, Stalaco, Calodemia, Mooros and Ninadoon crumbled in an inferno of gouting energy. Wedma, Shilal, Sinaan all burned in a few hours.

In Necranal, the pastel-coloured city of the mountain, Iolinda died with some twenty millions of her citizens. And with the fall of Necranal our work was done.

Arjavh stood with me looking up at the smouldering mountainside which had been Necranal.

"For one woman's wrath," he said, "and another's love, you did this?"

"You are wrong, Arjavh," I said solemnly. "I did it for the only kind of peace that would have lasted." I waved my hand at the rubble that was Necranal.

"I know my race too well. This Earth would have been forever rent by strife of some kind. I had to decide who best deserved to live. If they had destroyed the Eldren, then they would have fought among themselves for something. For empty things, too—for power over their fellows, for a bauble, for possession of a woman who didn't want them." I sighed.

"They never grew up, Arjavh, ancient as my race was. I'm driven to wonder if that is why the first humans came to Earth—because they had been exiled by others of their kind. Perhaps these weren't representative of the whole. I think not."

"It is done now," Arjavh said. He gripped my arm, "Come friend, back to Mernadin—Ermizhad awaits you."

I was an empty man, then, bereft of emotion. I followed him towards the river, drifting sluggishly now, choked with black dust.

"I think I did right," I said. "It was not my will, you know, but something else. There are forces whose nature we shall never know, can only dream of. I think it was another will than mine which brought me to this age—not Rigenos. Rigenos, like me, was a puppet, a tool used, as I was used. It was doomed that Humanity should die on this planet."

"It is better that you think that," he said. "Come, now, let us go home."

epilogue

The scars of that destruction have healed now, as I end my chronicle. I returned to Loos Ptokai to wed Ermizhad, to have the secret of immortality conferred upon me, to brood for a year or two until my brain cleared.

It is clear, now. I feel no guilt about what I did. I feel more certain than ever that it was the decision of some Other.

So we are here, the three of us, Ermizhad, Arjavh and I. Arjavh is undisputed ruler of the Earth, an Eldren Earth, and we rule with him.

We cleansed this Earth of human kind—I am its last representative—and in so doing knitted this planet back into the pattern, allowed it to drift, at last, harmoniously with a harmonious Universe. For the Universe is old, perhaps even

dying, and it could not tolerate the humans who broke its peace.

Did I do right ?

It is too late for that question. I have sufficient control, nowadays, not to ask it, for I could not answer but in seeking to do so would destroy my own sanity.

One thing puzzles me. If, indeed, Time is cyclic and the Universe will be born again to turn another eternity, then Humanity will one day arise again, somehow, on this Earth and my adopted people will disappear from Earth, or seem to.

Ermizhad and I cannot bear children, so I am aware that I shall not be the father of your race. Then *how* shall you come again to disrupt the harmony of the Universe ?

There is only one answer which occurs to me. Some Being of a higher order wishes it—it is part of the pattern. It is, in its very disruption, a necessary part of the pattern.

Now, the Earth is peaceful. The silent air carries only the sounds of quiet laughter, the murmur of conversation, the small noises of small animals. We and the Earth are at peace.

But how long can it last ? Oh, how long can it last ?

—Michael Moorcock

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Nobody quite knew what went on in the watch-towers but it was very disconcerting trying to live a normal life—especially when that life had been radically changed by the arrival of Watchers

THE WATCH-TOWERS

BY J. G. BALLARD

The next day, for some reason, there was a sudden increase of activity in the watch-towers. This began during the latter half of the morning, and by noon, when Renthall left the hotel on his way to see Mrs. Osmond, seemed to have reached its peak. People were standing at their windows and balconies along both sides of the street, whispering agitatedly to each other behind the curtains and pointing up into the sky.

Renthall usually tried to ignore the watch-towers, resenting even the smallest concession to the fact of their existence, but at the bottom of the street, where he was hidden in the shadow thrown by one of the houses, he stopped and craned his head up at the nearest tower.

A hundred feet away from him, it hung over the Public Library, its tip poised no more than twenty feet above the roof. The glass-enclosed cabin in the lowest tier appeared to be full of observers, opening and shutting the windows and shifting about what Renthall assumed were huge pieces of optical equipment. He looked around at the further towers,

suspended from the sky at three hundred feet intervals in every direction, noticing an occasional flash of light as a window turned and caught the sun.

An elderly man wearing a shabby black suit and wing collar, who usually loitered outside the library, came across the street to Renthall and backed into the shadows beside him.

"They're up to something all right." He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered up anxiously at the watch-towers. "I've never seen them like this as long as I can remember."

Renthall studied his face. However alarmed, he was obviously relieved by the signs of activity. "I shouldn't worry unduly," Renthall told him. "It's a change to see something going on at all."

Before the other could reply he turned on his heel and strode away along the pavement. It took him ten minutes to reach the street in which Mrs. Osmond lived, and he fixed his eyes firmly on the ground, ignoring the few passers-by. Although dominated by the watch-towers—four of them hung in a line exactly down its centre—the street was almost deserted. Half the houses were untenanted and falling into what would soon be an irreversible state of disrepair. Usually Renthall assessed each property carefully, trying to decide whether to leave his hotel and take one of them, but the movement in the watch-towers had caused him more anxiety than he was prepared to admit, and the terrace of houses passed unnoticed.

Mrs. Osmond's house stood half-way down the street, its gate swinging loosely on its rusty hinges. Renthall hesitated under the plane tree growing by the edge of the pavement, and then crossed the narrow garden and quickly let himself through the door.

Mrs. Osmond invariably spent the afternoon sitting out on the veranda in the sun, gazing at the weeds in the back garden, but today she had retreated to a corner of the sitting room. She was sorting a suitcase full of old papers when Renthall came in.

Renthall made no attempt to embrace her and wandered over to the window. Mrs. Osmond had half drawn the curtains and he pulled them back. There was a watch-tower ninety feet away, almost directly ahead, hanging over the parallel terrace of empty houses. The lines of towers receded

diagonally from left to right towards the horizon, partly obscured by the bright haze.

"Do you think you should have come today?" Mrs. Osmond asked, shifting her plump hips nervously in the chair.

"Why not?" Renthall said, scanning the towers, hands loosely in his pockets.

"But if they're going to keep a closer watch on us now they'll notice you coming here."

"I shouldn't believe all the rumours you hear," Renthall told her calmly.

"What do you think it means then?"

"I've absolutely no idea. Their movements may be as random and meaningless as our own." Renthall shrugged.

"Perhaps they *are* going to keep a closer watch on us. What does it matter if all they do is stare?"

"Then you mustn't come here any more!" Mrs. Osmond protested.

"Why? I hardly believe they can see through walls."

"They're not that stupid," Mrs. Osmond said irritably.

"They'll soon put two and two together, if they haven't already."

Renthall took his eyes off the tower and looked down at Mrs. Osmond patiently. "My dear, this house isn't tapped. For all they know we may be darning our prayer rugs or discussing the endocrine system of the tapeworm."

"Not you, Charles," Mrs. Osmond said with a short laugh. "Not if they know you." Evidently pleased by this sally, she relaxed and took a cigarette out of the box on the table.

"Perhaps they don't know me," Renthall said dryly. "In fact, I'm quite sure they don't. If they did I can't believe I should still be here."

He noticed himself stooping, a reliable sign that he was worrying, and went over to the sofa.

"Is the school going to start tomorrow?" Mrs. Osmond asked when he had disposed his long thin legs around the table.

"It should do," Renthall said. "Hanson went down to the Town Hall this morning, but as usual they had little idea of what was going on."

He opened his jacket and pulled out of the inner pocket an old but neatly folded copy of a woman's magazine.

"Charles!" Mrs. Osmond exclaimed. "Where did you get this?"

She took it from Renthall and started leafing through the soiled pages.

"One of my sources," Renthall said. From the sofa he could still see the watch-tower over the houses opposite. "Georgina Simons. She has a library of them."

He rose, went over to the window and drew the curtains across.

"Charles, don't. I can't see."

"Read it later," Renthall told her. He lay back on the sofa again. "Are you coming to the recital this afternoon?"

"Hasn't it been cancelled?" Mrs. Osmond asked, putting the magazine down reluctantly.

"No, of course not."

"Charles, I don't think I want to go." Mrs. Osmond frowned. "What records is Hanson going to play?"

"Some Tchaikovsky. And Grieg." He tried to make it sound interesting. "You must come. We can't just sit about subsiding into this state of boredom and uselessness."

"I know," Mrs. Osmond said fractiously. "But I don't feel like it. Not today. All those records bore me. I've heard them so often."

"They bore me too. But at least it's something to do." He put an arm around Mrs. Osmond's shoulders and began to play with the darker unbleached hair behind her ears, tapping the large nickel earrings she wore and listening to them tinkle.

When he put his hand on to her knee Mrs. Osmond stood up and prowled aimlessly around the room, straightening her skirt.

"Julia, what is the matter with you?" Renthall asked irritably. "Have you got a headache?"

Mrs. Osmond was by the window, gazing up at the watch-towers. "Do you think they're going to come down?"

"Of course not!" Renthall snapped. "Where on earth did you get that idea?"

Suddenly he felt unbearably exasperated. The confined dimensions of the dusty sitting room seemed to suffocate reason. He stood up and buttoned his jacket. "I'll see you this afternoon at the Institute, Julia. The recital starts at three."

Mrs. Osmond nodded vaguely, unfastened the french windows and ambled forwards across the veranda into full

view of the watch-towers, the glassy expression on her face like a suppliant nun's.

As Renthall had expected, the school did not open the next day. When they tired of hanging around the hotel after breakfast he and Hanson went down to the Town Hall. The building was almost empty and the only official they were able to find was unhelpful.

"We have no instructions at present," he told them, "but as soon as the term starts you will be notified. Though from what I hear the postponement is to be indefinite."

"Is that the committee's decision?" Renthall asked. "Or just another of the town clerk's brilliant extemporisings?"

"The school committee is no longer meeting," the official said. "I'm afraid the town clerk isn't here today." Before Renthall could speak he added: "You will, of course, continue to draw your salaries. Perhaps you would care to call in at the treasurer's department on your way out?"

Renthall and Hanson left and looked about for a cafe. Finally they found one that was open and sat under the awning, staring vacantly at the watch-towers hanging over the roof-tops around them. Their activity had lessened considerably since the previous day. The nearest tower was only fifty feet away, immediately above a disused office building on the other side of the street. The windows in the observation tier remained shut, but every few minutes Renthall noticed a shadow moving behind the panes.

Eventually a waitress came out to them, and Renthall ordered coffee.

"I think I shall have to give a few lessons," Hanson remarked. "All this leisure is becoming too much of a good thing."

"It's an idea," Renthall agreed. "If you can find anyone interested. I'm sorry the recital yesterday was such a flop."

Hanson shrugged. "I'll see if I can get hold of some new records. By the way, I thought Julia looked very handsome yesterday."

Renthall acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow of his head. "I'd like to take her out more often."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"Why on earth not?"

"Well, just at present, you know." Hanson inclined a finger at the watch-towers.

"I don't see that it matters particularly." Renthall said. He disliked personal confidences and was about to change the subject when Hanson leaned forward across the table.

"Perhaps not, but I gather there was some mention of you at the last Council meeting. One or two members were rather critical of your little *menage a deux*." He smiled thinly at Renthall, who was frowning into his coffee. "Sheer spite, no doubt, but your behaviour is a little idiosyncratic."

Controlling himself, Renthall pushed away the coffee cup. "Do you mind telling me what damned business it is of theirs?"

Hanson laughed. "None, really, except that they are the executive authority, and I suppose we should take our cue from them." Renthall snorted at this, and Hanson went on: "As a matter of interest, you may receive an official directive over the next few days."

"A *what*?" Renthall exploded. He sat back, shaking his head incredulously. "Are you serious?" When Hanson nodded he began to laugh harshly. "Those idiots! I don't know why we put up with them. Sometimes their stupidity positively staggers me."

"Steady on," Hanson demurred. "I do see their point. Bearing in mind the big commotion in the watch-towers yesterday the Council probably feel we shouldn't do anything that might antagonise them. You never know, they may even be acting on official instructions."

Renthall glanced contemptuously at Hanson. "Do you *really* believe that nonsense about the Council being in touch with the watch-towers? It may give a few simpletons a sense of security, but for heaven's sake don't try it on me. My patience is just about exhausted." He watched Hanson carefully, wondering which of the Council members had provided him with his information. The lack of subtlety depressed him painfully. "However, thanks for warning me. I suppose it means there'll be an overpowering air of embarrassment when Julia and I go to the cinema tomorrow."

Hanson shook his head. "No. Actually the performance has been cancelled. In view of yesterday's disturbances."

"But why—?" Renthall slumped back. "Haven't they got the intelligence to realise that it's just at this sort of time

that we need every social get-together we can organise? People are hiding away in their back bedrooms like a lot of frightened ghosts. We've got to bring them out, give them something that will pull them together."

He gazed up thoughtfully at the watch-tower across the street. Shadows circulated behind the frosted panes of the observation windows. "Some sort of gala, say, or a garden fete. Who could organise it, though?"

Hanson pushed back his chair. "Careful, Charles. I don't know whether the Council would altogether approve."

"I'm sure they wouldn't." After Hanson had left he remained at the table and returned to his solitary contemplation of the watch-towers.

For half an hour Renthall sat at the table, playing absently with his empty coffee cup and watching the few people who passed along the street. No one else visited the cafe, and he was glad to be able to pursue his thoughts alone, in this miniature urban vacuum, with nothing to intervene between himself and the lines of watch-towers stretching into the haze beyond the roof-tops.

With the exception of Mrs. Osmond, Renthall had virtually no close friends in whom to confide. With his sharp intelligence and impatience with trivialities, Renthall was one of those men with whom others find it difficult to relax. A certain innate condescension, a reserved but unmistakable attitude of superiority held them away from him, though few people regarded him as anything but a shabby pedagogue. At the hotel he kept to himself. There was little social contact between the guests; in the lounge and dining room they sat immersed in their old newspapers and magazines, occasionally murmuring quietly to each other. The only thing which could mobilise the simultaneous communion of the guests was some untoward activity in the watch-towers, and at such times Renthall always maintained an absolute silence.

Just before he stood up a square thick-set figure approached down the street. Renthall recognised the man and was about to turn his seat to avoid having to greet him, but something about his expression made him lean forward. Fleshy and dark-jowelled, the man walked with an easy rolling gait his double-breasted check overcoat open to reveal a well-tended

midriff. This was Victor Boardman, owner of the local flea-pit cinema, sometime bootlegger and procurer at large.

Renthall had never spoken to him, but he was aware that Boardman shared with him the distinction of bearing the stigma of the Council's disapproval. Hanson claimed that the Council had successfully stamped out Boardman's illicit activities, but the latter's permanent expression of smug contempt for the rest of the world seemed to belie this.

As he passed they exchanged glances, and Boardman's face broke momentarily into a knowing smirk. It was obviously directed at Renthall, and implied a pre-judgment of some event about which Renthall as yet knew nothing, presumably his coming collision with the Council. Obviously Boardman expected him to capitulate to the Council without a murmur.

Annoyed, Renthall turned his back on Boardman, then watched him over his shoulder as he padded off down the street, his easy relaxed shoulders swaying from side to side.

The following day the activity in the watch-towers had subsided entirely. The blue haze from which they extended was brighter than it had been for several months, and the air in the streets seemed to sparkle with the light reflected off the observation windows. There was no sign of movement among them, and the sky had a rigid uniform appearance that indicated an indefinite lull.

For some reason, however, Renthall found himself more nervous than he had been for some time. The school had not yet opened, but he felt strangely reluctant to visit Mrs. Osmond and remained indoors all morning, shunning the streets as if avoiding some invisible shadow of guilt.

The long lines of watch-towers stretching endlessly from one horizon to the other reminded him that he could soon expect to receive the Council's 'directive'—Hanson would not have mentioned it by accident—and it was always during the lulls that the Council was most active in consolidating its position, issuing a stream of petty regulations and amendments.

Renthall would have liked to challenge the Council's authority on some formal matter unconnected with himself—the validity, for example, of one of the byelaws prohibiting public assemblies in the street—but the prospect of all the intrigue involved in canvassing the necessary support bored him utterly. Although none of them individually would challenge the Council, most people would have been glad to

see it toppled, but there seemed to be no likely focus for their opposition. Apart from the fear that the Council was in touch with the watch-towers, no one would stand up for Renthall's right to carry on his affair with Mrs. Osmond.

Curiously enough, she seemed unaware of these cross-currents when he went to see her that afternoon. She had cleaned the house and was in high humour, the windows wide open to the brilliant air.

"Charles, what's the matter with you?" she chided him when he slumped inertly into a chair. "You look like a broody hen."

"I felt rather tired this morning. It's probably the hot weather." When she sat down on the arm of the chair he put one hand listlessly on her hip, trying to summon together his energies. "Recently I've been developing an *idée fixe* about the Council, I must be going through a crisis of confidence. I need some method of re-asserting myself."

Mrs. Osmond stroked his hair soothingly with her cool fingers, her eyes watching him silkily. "What *you* need, Charles, is a little mother love. You're so isolated at that hotel, among all those old people. Why don't you rent one of the houses in this road? I'd be able to look after you then."

Renthall glanced up at her sardonically. "Perhaps I could move in here?" he asked, but she tossed her head back with a derisive snort and went over to the window.

She gazed up at the nearest watch-tower a hundred feet away, its windows closed and silent, the great shaft disappearing into the haze. "What do you suppose they're thinking about?"

Renthall snapped his fingers off-handedly. "They're probably not thinking about anything. Sometimes I wonder whether there's anyone there at all. The movements we see may be just optical illusions. Although the windows appear to open no-one's ever actually *seen* any of them. For all we know this place may well be nothing more than an abandoned zoo."

Mrs. Osmond regarded him with rueful amusement. "Charles, you do pick some extraordinary metaphors. I often doubt if you're like the rest of us, I wouldn't dare say the sort of things you do in case—" She broke off, glancing up involuntarily at the watch-towers hanging from the sky.

Idly, Renthall asked : " In case what ?"

" Well, in case—" Irritably, she said : " Don't be absurd, Charles, doesn't the thought of those towers hanging down over us frighten you at all ?"

Renthall turned his head slowly and stared up at the watch-towers. Once he had tried to count them, but there seemed little point. " Yes, they frighten me," he said noncommittally. " In the same way that Hanson and the old people at the hotel and everyone else here does. But not in the sense that the boys at school are frightened of *me*."

Mrs. Osmond nodded, misinterpreting this last remark. " Children are very perceptive, Charles. They probably know you're not interested in them. Unfortunately they're not old enough yet to understand what the watch-towers mean."

She gave a slight shiver, and pulled her cardigan around her shoulders. " You know, on the days when they're busy behind their windows I can hardly move around, it's terrible. I feel so listless, all I want to do is sit and stare at the wall. Perhaps I'm more sensitive to their, er, radiations than most people."

Renthall smiled. " You must be. Don't let them depress you. Next time why don't you put on a paper hat and do a pirouette ?"

" What ? Oh, Charles, stop being cynical."

" I'm not. Seriously, Julia, do you think it would make any difference ?"

Mrs. Osmond shook her head sadly. " You try, Charles, and then tell me. Where are you going ?"

Renthall paused at the window. " Back to the hotel to rest. By the way, do you know Victor Boardman ?"

" I used to, once. Why, what are you getting up to with him ?"

" Does he own the garden next to the cinema car-park ?"

" I think so." Mrs. Osmond laughed. " Are you going to take up gardening ?"

" In a sense." With a wave, Renthall left.

He began with Dr. Clifton, whose room was directly below his own. Clifton's duties at his surgery occupied him for little more than an hour a day—there were virtually no deaths or illnesses—but he still retained sufficient initiative to cultivate a hobby. He had turned one end of his room into a small

aviary, containing a dozen canaries, and spent much of his time trying to teach them tricks. His acerbic, matter-of-fact manner always tired Renthall, but he respected the doctor for not sliding into total lethargy like everyone else.

Clifton considered his suggestion carefully. "I agree with you, something of the sort is probably necessary. A good idea, Renthall. Properly conducted, it might well provide just the lift people need."

"The main question, doctor, is one of organisation. The only suitable place is the Town Hall."

Clifton nodded. "Yes, there's your problem. I'm afraid I've no influence with the Council, if that's what you're suggesting. I don't know what you can do. You'll have to get their permission of course, and in the past they haven't shown themselves to be very radical or original. They prefer to maintain the status quo."

Renthall nodded, then added casually: "They're only interested in maintaining their own power. At times I become rather tired of our Council."

Clifton glanced at him and then turned back to his cages. "You're preaching revolution, Renthall," he said quietly, a forefinger stroking the beak of one of the canaries. Pointedly, he refrained from seeing Renthall to the door.

Writing the doctor off, Renthall rested for a few minutes in his room, pacing up and down the strip of faded carpet, then went down to the basement to see the manager, Mulvaney.

"I'm only making some initial enquiries. As yet I haven't applied for permission, but Dr. Clifton thinks the idea is excellent, and there's no doubt we'll get it. Are you up to looking after the catering?"

Mulvaney's sallow face watched Renthall sceptically. "Of course I'm up to it, but how serious are you?" He leaned against his roll-top desk. "You think you'll get permission? You're wrong, Mr. Renthall, the Council wouldn't stand for the idea. They even closed the cinema, so they're not likely to allow a public party. Before you know what you'd have people dancing."

"I hardly think so, but does the idea appal you so much?"

Mulvaney shook his head, already bored with Renthall. "You get a permit, Mr. Renthall, and then we can talk seriously."

Tightening his voice, Renthall asked : " Is it necessary to get the Council's permission? Couldn't we go ahead without?"

Without looking up, Mulvaney sat down at his desk. " Keep trying, Mr. Renthall, it's a great idea."

During the next few days Renthall pursued his enquiries, in all approaching some half dozen people. In general he met with the same negative response, but as he intended he soon noticed a subtle but nonetheless distinct quickening of interest around him. The usual fragmentary murmur of conversation would fade away abruptly as he passed the tables in the dining room, and the service was fractionally more prompt. Hanson no longer took coffee with him in the mornings, and once Renthall saw him in guarded conversation with the town clerk's secretary, a young man called Barnes. This, he assumed, was Hanson's contact.

In the meantime the activity in the watch-towers remained at zero. The endless lines of towers hung down from the bright hazy sky, the observation windows closed, and the people in the streets below sank slowly into their usual mindless torpor, wandering from hotel to library to café. Determined on his course of action, Renthall felt his confidence return.

Allowing an interval of a week to elapse, he finally called upon Victor Boardman.

The bootlegger received him in his office above the cinema, greeting him with a wry smile.

" Well, Mr. Renthall, I hear you're going into the entertainment business. Drunken gambols and all that. I'm surprised at you."

" A fete," Renthall corrected. The seat Boardman had offered him faced towards the window—deliberately, he guessed—and provided an uninterrupted view of the watch-tower over the roof of the adjacent furniture store. Only forty feet away, it blocked off half the sky. The metal plates which formed its rectangular sides were annealed together by some process Renthall was unable to identify, neither welded nor rivetted, almost as if the entire tower had been cast *in situ*. He moved to another chair so that his back was to the window.

" The school is still closed, so I thought I'd try to make myself useful. That's what I'm paid for. I've come to you because you've had a good deal of experience."

"Yes, I've had a lot of experience, Mr. Renthall. Very varied. As one of the Council's employees, I take it you have its permission?"

Renthall evaded this. "The Council is naturally a conservative body, Mr. Boardman. Obviously at this stage I'm acting on my own initiative. I shall consult the Council at the appropriate moment later, when I can offer them a practicable proposition."

Boardman nodded sagely. "That's sensible, Mr. Renthall. Now what exactly do you want me to do? Organise the whole thing for you?"

"No, but naturally I'd be very grateful if you would. For the present I merely want to ask permission to hold the fete on a piece of your property."

"The cinema? I'm not going to take all those seats out, if that's what you're after."

"Not the cinema. Though we could use the bar and cloak-rooms," Renthall extemporised, hoping the scheme did not sound too grandiose. "Is the old beer-garden next to the car park your property?"

For a moment Boardman was silent. He watched Renthall shrewdly, picking his nails with his cigar-cutter, a faint suggestion of admiration in his eyes. "So you want to hold the fete in the open, Mr. Renthall? Is that it?"

Renthall nodded, smiling back at Boardman. "I'm glad to see you living up to your reputation for getting quickly to the point. Are you prepared to lend the garden? Of course, you'll have a big share of the profits. In fact, if it's any inducement, you can have all the profits."

Boardman put out his cigar. "Mr. Renthall, you're obviously a man of many parts. I under-estimated you. I thought you merely had a grievance against the Council. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Mr. Boardman, will you lend the garden?" Renthall repeated.

There was an amused but thoughtful smile on Boardman's lips as he regarded the watch-tower framed by the window. "There are two watch-towers directly over the beer-garden, Mr. Renthall."

"I'm fully aware of that. It's obviously the chief attraction of the property. Now, can you give me an answer?"

The two men regarded each other silently, and then Boardman gave an almost imperceptible nod. Renthall realised that his scheme was being taken seriously by Boardman. He was obviously using Renthall for his own purposes, for once having flaunted the Council's authority he would be able to resume all his other, more profitable activities. Of course, the fete would never be held, but in answer to Boardman's questions he outlined a provisional programme. They fixed the date of the fete at a month ahead, and arranged to meet again at the beginning of the next week.

Two days later, as he expected, the first emissaries of the Council came to see him.

He was waiting at his usual table on the cafe terrace, the silent watch-towers suspended from the air around him, when he saw Hanson hurrying along the street.

"Do join me." Renthall drew a chair back. "What's the news?"

"Nothing—though you should know, Charles." He gave Renthall a dry smile, as if admonishing a favourite pupil, then gazed about the empty terrace for the waitress. "Service is appallingly bad here. Tell me, Charles, what's all this talk about you and Victor Boardman, I could hardly believe my ears."

Renthall leaned back in his chair. "I don't know, you tell me."

"We—er, I was wondering if Boardman was taking advantage of some perfectly innocent remark he might have overheard. This business of a garden party you're supposed to be organising with him—it sounds absolutely fantastic."

"Why?"

"But Charles." Hanson leaned forward to examine Renthall carefully, trying to make sense of his unruffled pose. "Surely you aren't serious?"

"But why not? If I want to, why shouldn't I organise a garden party—fete, to be more accurate?"

"It doesn't make an iota of difference," Hanson said tartly. "Apart from any other reason"—here he glanced skyward—"the fact remains that you are an employee of the Council."

Hands in his trouser pockets, Renthall tipped back his chair. "But that gives them no mandate to interfere in my private life. You seem to be forgetting, but the terms of my

contract specifically exclude any such authority. I am not on the established grade, as my salary differential shows. If the Council disapprove, the only sanction they can apply is to give me the sack."

"They will, Charles, don't sound so smug."

Renthall let this pass. "Fair enough, if they can find anyone else to take on the job. Frankly I doubt it. They've managed to swallow their moral scruples in the past."

"Charles, this is different. As long as you're discreet no-one gives a hoot about your private affairs, but this garden party is a public matter, and well within the Council's province."

Renthall yawned. "I'm rather bored with the subject of the Council. Technically, the fete will be a private affair, by invitation only. They've no statutory right to be consulted at all. If a breach of the peace takes place the Chief Constable can take action. Why all the fuss, anyway? I'm merely trying to provide a little harmless festivity."

Hanson shook his head. "Charles, you're deliberately evading the point. According to Boardman this fete will take place out of doors—directly under two of the watch-towers. Have you realised what the repercussions would be?"

"Yes." Renthall formed the word carefully in his mouth.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Charles!" Hanson lowered his head at this apparent blasphemy, glanced up at the watch-towers over the street as if expecting instant retribution to descend from them. "Look, my dear fellow, take my advice. Drop the whole idea. You don't stand a chance anyway of ever holding this mad jape, so why deliberately court trouble with the Council? Who knows what their real power would be if they were provoked?"

Renthall rose from his seat. He looked up at the watch-tower hanging from the air on the other side of the road, controlling himself when a slight pang of anxiety stirred his heart. "I'll send you an invitation," he called back, then walked away to his hotel.

The next afternoon the town clerk's secretary called upon him in his room. During the interval, no doubt intended as a salutary pause for reflection, Renthall had remained at the hotel, reading quietly in his armchair. He paid one brief visit to Mrs. Osmond, but she seemed nervous and irritable,

evidently aware of the imminent clash. The strain of maintaining an appearance of unconcern had begun to tire Renthall, and he avoided the open streets whenever possible. Fortunately the school had still not opened.

Barnes, the dapper dark-haired secretary, came straight to the point. Refusing Renthall's offer of an armchair, he held a sheet of pink duplicated paper in his hand, apparently a minute of the last Council meeting.

"Mr. Renthall, the Council has been informed of your intention to hold a garden fete in some three weeks' time. I have been asked by the chairman of the Watch Committee to express the committee's grave misgivings, and to request you accordingly to terminate all arrangements and cancel the fete immediately, pending an enquiry."

"I'm sorry, Barnes, but I'm afraid our preparations are too far advanced. We're about to issue invitations."

Barnes hesitated, casting his eye around Renthall's faded room and few shabby books as if hoping to find some ulterior motive for Renthall's behaviour.

"Mr. Renthall, perhaps I could explain that this request is tantamount to a direct order from the Council."

"So I'm aware." Renthall sat down on his window-sill and gazed out at the watch-towers. "Hanson and I went over all this, as you probably know. The Council have no more right to order me to cancel this fete than they have to stop me walking down the street."

Barnes smiled his thin bureaucratic smirk. "Mr. Renthall, this is not a matter of the Council's statutory jurisdiction. This order is issued by virtue of the authority vested in it by its superiors. If you prefer, you can assume that the Council is merely passing on a direct instruction it has received." He inclined his head toward the watch-towers.

Renthall stood up. "Now we're at last getting down to business." He gathered himself together. "Perhaps you could tell the Council to convey to its superiors, as you call them, my polite but firm refusal. Do you get *my* point?"

Barnes retreated fractionally. He summed Renthall up carefully, then nodded. "I think so, Mr. Renthall. No doubt you understand what you're doing."

After he had gone Renthall drew the blinds over the window and lay down on his bed, for the next hour he made an effort to relax.

His final show-down with the Council was to take place the following day. Summoned to an emergency meeting of the Watch Committee, he accepted the invitation with alacrity, certain that with every member of the committee present the main council chamber would be used. This would give him a perfect opportunity to humiliate the Council by publicly calling their bluff.

Both Hanson and Mrs. Osmond assumed that he would capitulate without argument.

"Well, Charles, you brought it upon yourself," Hanson told him. "Still, I expect they'll be lenient with you. It's a matter of face now."

"More than that, I hope," Renthall replied. "They claim they were passing on a direct instruction from the watch-towers."

"Well, yes . . ." Hanson gestured vaguely. "Of course. Obviously the towers wouldn't intervene in such a trivial matter. They rely on the Council to keep a watching brief for them, as long as the Council's authority is respected they're prepared to remain aloof."

"It sounds an ideally simple arrangement. How do you think the communication between the Council and the watch-towers takes place?" Renthall pointed to the watch-tower across the street from the cabin. The shuttered observation tier hung emptily in the air like an out-of-season gondola. "By telephone? Or do they semaphor?"

But Hanson merely laughed and changed the subject.

Julia Osmond was equally vague, but equally convinced of the Council's infallibility.

"Of course they receive instructions from the towers, Charles. But don't worry, they obviously have a sense of proportion—they've been letting you come here all this time." She turned a monitory finger at Renthall, her broad-hipped bulk obscuring the towers from him. "That's your chief fault, Charles. You think you're more important than you are. Look at you now, sitting there all hunched up with your face like an old shoe. You think the Council and the watch-towers are going to give you some terrible punishment. But they won't, because you're not worth it."

Renthall picked uneagerly at his lunch at the hotel, conscious of the guests watching from the tables around him. Many had brought visitors with them, and he guessed that there would be a full attendance at the meeting that afternoon.

After lunch he retired to his room, made a desultory attempt to read until the meeting at half past two. Outside, the watch-towers hung in their long lines from the bright haze. There was no sign of movement in the observation windows, and Renthall studied them openly, hands in pockets, like a general surveying the dispositions of his enemy's forces. The haze was lower than usual, filling the interstices between the towers, so that in the distance, where the free space below their tips was hidden by the intervening roof-tops, the towers seemed to rise upwards into the air like rectangular chimneys over an industrial landscape, wreathed in white smoke.

The nearest tower was about seventy-five feet away, diagonally to his left, over the eastern end of the open garden shared by the other hotels in the crescent. Just as Renthall turned away, one of the windows in the observation deck appeared to open, the opaque glass pane throwing a spear of sharp sunlight directly towards him. Renthall flinched back, heart suddenly surging, then leaned forward again. The activity in the tower had subsided as instantly as it had arisen. The windows were sealed, no signs of movement behind them. Renthall listened to the sounds from the rooms above and below him. So conspicuous a motion of the window, the first sign of activity for many days, and a certain indication of more to come, should have brought a concerted rush to the balconies. But the hotel was silent, and below he could hear Dr. Clifton at his cages by the window, humming absently to himself.

Renthall scanned the windows on the other side of the garden but the lines of craning faces he expected were absent. He examined the watch-tower carefully, assuming that he had seen a window open in a hotel nearby. Yet the explanation dissatisfied him. The ray of sunlight had cleaved the air like a silver blade, with a curious luminous intensity that only the windows of the watch-towers seemed able to reflect, aimed unerringly at his head.

He broke off to glance at his watch, cursed when he saw that it was after quarter past two. The Town Hall was a good half mile away, and he would arrive dishevelled and perspiring.

There was a knock on his door. He opened it to find Mulvaney.

"What is it? I'm busy now."

"Sorry, Mr. Renthall. A man called Barnes from the Council asked me to give you an urgent message. He said the meeting this afternoon has been postponed."

"Ha!" Leaving the door open, Renthall snapped his fingers contemptuously at the air. "So they've had second thoughts after all. Discretion is the better part of valour." Smiling broadly, he called Mulvaney back into his room. "Mr. Mulvaney! Just a moment!"

"Good news, Mr. Renthall?"

"Excellent. I've got them on the run." He added: "You wait and see, the next meeting of the Watch Committee will be held in private."

"You might be right, Mr. Renthall. Some people think they have over-reached themselves a bit."

"Really? That's rather interesting. Good." Renthall noted this mentally, then gestured Mulvaney over to the window. "Tell me, Mr. Mulvaney, just now while you were coming up the stairs, did you notice any activity out there?"

He gestured briefly towards the tower, not wanting to draw attention to himself by pointing at it. Mulvaney gazed out over the garden, shaking his head slowly. "Can't say I did, not more than usual. What sort of activity?"

"You know, a window opening . . ." When Mulvaney continued to shake his head, Renthall said: "Good. Let me know if that fellow Barnes calls again."

When Mulvaney had gone he strode up and down the room, whistling a Mozart rondo.

Over the next three days, however, the mood of elation gradually faded. To Renthall's annoyance no further date was fixed for the cancelled committee meeting. He had assumed that it would be held in camera, but the members must have realised that it would make little difference. Everyone would soon know that Renthall had successfully challenged their claim to be in communication with the watch-towers.

Renthall chafed at the possibility that the meeting had been postponed indefinitely. By avoiding a direct clash with Renthall the Council had cleverly side-stepped the danger before them.

Alternatively, Renthall speculated whether he had underestimated them. Perhaps they realised that the real target of his defiance was not the Council, but the watch-towers. The faint possibility—however hard he tried to dismiss it as childish fantasy the fear still persisted—that there was some mysterious collusion between the towers and the Council now began to grow in his mind. The fete had been cleverly conceived as

an innocent gesture of defiance towards the towers, and it would be difficult to find something to take its place that would not be blatantly outrageous and stain him indelibly with the sin of hubris.

Besides, as he carefully reminded himself, he was not out to launch open rebellion. Originally he had reacted from a momentary feeling of pique, exasperated by the spectacle of the boredom and lethargy around him and the sullen fear with which everyone viewed the towers. There was no question of challenging their absolute authority—at least, not at this stage. He merely wanted to define the existential margins of their world—if they *were* caught in a trap, let them at least eat the cheese. Also, he calculated that it would take an affront of truly heroic scale to provoke any reaction from the watch-towers, and that a certain freedom by default was theirs, a small but valuable credit to their account built into the system.

In practical, existential terms this might well be considerable, so that the effective boundary between black and white, between good and evil, was drawn some distance from the theoretical boundary. This watershed was the penumbral zone where the majority of the quickening pleasures of life were to be found, and where Renthall was most at home. Mrs. Osmond's villa lay well within its territory, and Renthall would have liked to move himself over its margins. First, though, he would have to assess the extent of this 'blue' shift, or moral parallax, but by cancelling the committee meeting the Council had effectively forestalled him.

As he waited for Barnes to call again a growing sense of frustration came over him. The watch-towers seemed to fill the sky, and he drew the blinds irritably. On the flat roof, two floors above, a continuous light hammering sounded all day, but he shunned the streets and no longer went to the cafe for his morning coffee.

Finally he climbed the stairs to the roof, through the doorway saw two carpenters working under Mulvaney's supervision. They were laying a rough board floor over the tarred cement. As he shielded his eyes from the bright glare a third man came up the stairs behind him, carrying two sections of wooden railing.

"Sorry about the noise, Mr. Renthall," Mulvaney apologised. "We should be finished by tomorrow."

"What's going on?" Renthall asked. "Surely you're not putting a sun garden here."

"That's the idea," Mulvaney pointed to the railings. "A few chairs and umbrellas, be pleasant for the old folk. Dr. Clifton suggested it." He peered down at Renthall, who was still hiding in the doorway. "You'll have to bring a chair up here yourself, you look as if you could use a little sunshine."

Renthall raised his eyes to the watch-tower almost directly over their heads. A pebble tossed underhand would easily have rebounded off the corrugated metal underside. The roof was completely exposed to the score of watch-towers hanging in the air around them, and he wondered whether Mulvaney was out of his mind—none of the old people would sit there for more than a second.

Mulvaney pointed to a roof-top on the other side of the garden, where similar activity was taking place. A bright yellow awning was being unfurled, and two seats were already occupied.

Renthall hesitated, lowering his voice. "But what about the watch-towers?"

"The what—?" Distracted by one of the carpenters, Mulvaney turned away for a moment, then rejoined him. "Yes, you'll be able to watch everything going on from up here, Mr. Renthall."

Puzzled, Renthall made his way back to his room. Had Mulvaney misheard his question, or was this a fatuous attempt to provoke the towers? Renthall grimly visualised his responsibility if a whole series of petty acts of defiance took place. Perhaps he had accidentally tapped all the repressed resentment that had been accumulating for years?

To Renthall's amazement, a succession of creaking ascents of the staircase the next morning announced the first party of residents to use the sun deck. Just before lunch Renthall went up to the roof, found a group of at least a dozen of the older guests sitting out below the watch-tower, placidly inhaling the cool air. None of them seemed in the least perturbed by the tower. At two or three points around the crescent sun-bathers had emerged, as if answering some deep latent call. People sat on make-shift porches or leaned from the sills, calling to each other.

Equally surprising was the failure of this upsurge of activity to be followed by any reaction from the watch-towers. Half-hidden behind his blinds, Renthall scrutinised the towers carefully, once caught what seemed to be a distant flicker of movement from an observation window half a mile away, but otherwise the towers remained silent, their long ranks receding to the horizon in all directions, motionless and enigmatic. The haze had thinned slightly, and the long shafts protruded further from the sky, their outlines darker and more vibrant.

Shortly before lunch Hanson interrupted his scrutiny. "Hello, Charles. Great news ! The school opens tomorrow. Thank heaven for that, I was getting so bored I could hardly stand up straight."

Renthall nodded. "Good. What's galvanised them into life so suddenly ?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose they had to re-open sometime. Aren't you pleased ?"

"Of course. Am I still on the staff ?"

"Naturally. The Council doesn't bear childish grudges. They might have sacked you a week ago, but things are different now."

"What do you mean ?"

Hanson scrutinised Renthall carefully. "I mean the school's opened. What is the matter, Charles ?"

Renthall went over to the window, his eyes roving along the lines of sun-bathers on the roofs. He waited a few seconds in case there was some sign of activity from the watch-towers. "When's the Watch Committee going to hear my case ?"

Hanson shrugged. "They won't bother now. They know you're a tougher proposition than some of the people they've been pushing around. Forget the whole thing."

"But I don't want to forget it. I want the hearing to take place. Damn it, I deliberately invented the whole business of the fete to force them to show their hand. Now they're furiously back-peddling."

"Well, what of it ? Relax, they have their difficulties too." He gave a laugh. "You never know, they'd probably be only too glad of an invitation now."

"They won't get one. You know, I almost feel they've outwitted me. When the fete doesn't take place everyone will assume I've given in to them."

"But it will take place. Haven't you seen Boardman recently? He's going great guns, obviously it'll be a tremendous show. Be careful he doesn't cut you out."

Puzzled, Renthall turned from the window. "Do you mean Boardman's going ahead with it?"

"Of course. It looks like it anyway. He's got a big marquee over the car park, dozens of stalls, bunting everywhere."

Renthall drove a fist into his palm. "The man's insane!" He turned to Hanson. "We've got to be careful, something's going on. I'm convinced the Council are just biding their time, they're deliberately letting the reins go so we'll overreach ourselves. Have you seen all these people on the roof-tops? Sun-bathing!"

"Good idea. Isn't that what you've wanted all along?"

"Not so blatantly as this." Renthall pointed to the nearest watch-tower. The windows were sealed, but the light reflected off them was far brighter than usual. "Sooner or later there'll be a short, sharp reaction. That's what the Council are waiting for."

"It's nothing to do with the Council. If people want to sit on the roof whose business is it but their own? Are you coming to lunch?"

"In a moment." Renthall stood quietly by the window, watching Hanson closely. A possibility he had not previously envisaged crossed his mind. He searched for some method of testing it. "Has the gong gone yet? My watch has stopped."

Hanson glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's twelve-thirty." He looked out through the window towards the clock tower in the distance over the Town Hall. One of Renthall's long-standing grievances against his room was that the tip of the nearby watch-tower hung directly over the clock-face, neatly obscuring it. Hanson nodded, re-setting his watch. "Twelve-thirty one. I'll see you in a few minutes."

After Hanson had gone Renthall sat on the bed, his courage ebbing slowly, trying to rationalise this unforeseen development.

The next day he came across his second case.

Boardman surveyed the dingy room distastefully, puzzled by the spectacle of Renthall hunched up in his chair by the window.

"Mr. Renthall, there's absolutely no question of cancelling it now. The fair's as good as started already. Anyway, what would be the point?"

"Our arrangement was that it should be a fete," Renthall pointed out. "You've turned it into a fun-fair, with a lot of stalls and hurdy-gurdys."

Unruffled by Renthall's schoolmasterly manner, Boardman scoffed. "Well, what's the difference? Anyway, my real idea is to roof it over and turn it into a permanent amusement park. The Council won't interfere. They're playing it quiet now."

"Are they? I doubt it." Renthall looked down into the garden. People sat about in their shirt sleeves, the women in floral dresses, evidently oblivious of the watch-towers filling the sky a hundred feet above their heads. The haze had receded still further, and at least two hundred yards of shaft were now visible. There were no signs of activity from the towers, but Renthall was convinced that this would soon begin.

"Tell me," he asked Boardman in a clear voice. "Aren't you frightened of the watch-towers?"

Boardman seemed puzzled. "The what towers?" He made a spiral motion with his cigar. "You mean the big slide? Don't worry I'm not having one of those, nobody's got the energy to climb all those steps."

He stuck his cigar in his mouth and ambled to the door. "Well, so long, Mr. Renthall. I'll send you an invite."

Later that afternoon Renthall went to see Dr. Clifton in his room below.

"Excuse me, doctor," he apologised, "but would you mind seeing me on a professional matter?"

"Well, not here, Renthall, I'm supposed to be off-duty." He turned from his canary cages by the window with a testy frown, then relented when he saw Renthall's intent expression. "All right, what's the trouble?"

While Clifton washed his hands Renthall explained. "Tell me, doctor, is there any mechanism known to you by which the simultaneous hypnosis of large groups of people could occur? We're all familiar with theatrical displays of the hypnotist's art, but I'm thinking of a situation in which the members of an entire small community—such as the residents of the hotels around this crescent—could be induced to accept a given proposition completely conflicting with reality."

Clifton stopped washing his hands. "I thought you wanted to see me professionally. I'm a doctor, not a witch doctor. What are you planning now, Renthall? Last week it was a fete, now you want to hypnotise an entire neighbourhood, you'd better be careful."

Renthall shook his head. "It's not I who want to carry out the hypnosis, Doctor. In fact I'm afraid the operation has already taken place. I don't know whether you've noticed anything strange about your patients?"

"Nothing more than usual," Clifton remarked dryly. He watched Renthall with increased interest. "Who's responsible for this mass hypnosis?" When Renthall paused and then pointed a forefinger at the ceiling Clifton nodded sagely. "I see. How sinister."

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand, doctor." Renthall went over to the window, looking out at the sun-shades below. He pointed to the watch-towers. "Just to clarify a small point, doctor. You do see the watch-towers?"

Clifton hesitated fractionally, moving imperceptibly towards his valise on the desk. Then he nodded: "Of course."

"Good. I'm relieved to hear it." Renthall laughed. "For a while I was beginning to think that I was the only one in step. Do you realise that both Hanson and Boardman can no longer see the towers? And I'm fairly certain that none of the people down there can or they wouldn't be sitting in the open. I'm convinced that this is the Council's doing, but it seems unlikely that they would have enough power—" He broke off, aware that Clifton was watching him fixedly. "What's the matter? Doctor!"

Clifton quickly took his prescription pad from his valise. "Renthall, caution is the essence of all strategy. It's important that we beware of over-hastiness. I suggest that we both rest this afternoon. Now, these will give you some sleep—"

For the first time in several days he ventured out into the street. Head down, angry for being caught out by the doctor, he drove himself along the pavement towards Mrs. Osmond, determined to find at least one person who could still see the towers. The streets were more crowded than he could remember for a long time and he was forced to look upward as he swerved in and out of the ambling pedestrians. Overhead, like the assault craft from which some apocalyptic air-raid would be launched, the watch-towers hung down from the sky, framed between the twin spires of the church,

blocking off a vista down the principle boulevarde, yet unperceived by the afternoon strollers.

Renthall passed the cafe, surprised to see the terrace packed with coffee-drinkers, then saw Boardman's marquee in the cinema car park. Music was coming from a creaking wurlitzer, and the gay ribbons of the bunting fluttered in the air.

Twenty yards from Mrs. Osmond's he saw her come through her front door, a large straw hat on her head.

"Charles! What are you doing here? I haven't seen you for days, I wondered what was the matter."

Renthall took the key from her fingers and pushed it back into the lock. Closing the door behind them, he paused in the darkened hall, regaining his breath.

"Charles, what on earth is going on? Is someone after you? You look terrible, my dear. Your face—"

"Never mind my face." Renthall collected himself, and led the way into the living room. "Come in here, quickly." He went over to the window and drew back the blinds, ascertained that the watch-tower over the row of houses opposite was still there. "Sit down and relax. I'm sorry to rush in like this but you'll understand in a minute." He waited until Mrs. Osmond settled herself reluctantly on the sofa, then rested his palms on the mantelpiece, organising his thoughts.

"The last few days have been fantastic, you wouldn't believe it, and to cap everything I've just made myself look the biggest possible fool in front of Clifton. God, I could—"

"Charles—!"

"Listen! Don't start interrupting me before I've begun, I've got enough to contend with. Something absolutely insane is going on everywhere, by some freak I seem to be the only one who's still *compus mentis*. I know that sounds as if I'm completely mad, but in fact it's true. Why I don't know, though I'm frightened it may be some sort of reprisal directed at me. However." He went over to the window. "Julia, what can you see out of that window?"

Mrs. Osmond dismantled her hat and squinted at the panes. She fidgetted uncomfortably. "Charles, what is going on?—I'll have to get my glasses." She subsided helplessly.

"Julia! You've never needed your glasses before to see these. Now tell me, what can you see?"

"Well, the row of houses, and the gardens . . ."

"Yes, what else?"

"The windows, of course, and there's a tree . . ."

"What about the sky?"

She nodded. "Yes, I can see that, there's a sort of haze, isn't there? Or is that my eyes?"

"No." Wearily, Renthall turned away from the window. For the first time a feeling of unassuageable fatigue had come over him. "Julia," he asked quietly. "Don't you remember the watch-towers?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, I don't. Where were they?" A look of concern came over her face. She took his arm gently. "Dear, what is going on?"

Renthall forced himself to stand upright. "I don't know." He drummed his forehead with his free hand. "You can't remember the towers at all, or the observation windows?" He pointed to the watch-tower hanging down the centre of the window. "There—used to be one over those houses. We were always looking at it. Do you remember how we used to draw the curtains upstairs?"

"Charles! Be careful, people will hear. Where are you going?"

Numbly, Renthall pulled back the door. "Outside," he said in a flat voice. "There's little point now in staying indoors."

He let himself through the front door, fifty yards from the house heard her call after him, turned quickly into a side road and hurried towards the first intersection.

Above him he was conscious of the watch-towers hanging in the bright air, but he kept his eyes level with the gates and hedges, scanning the empty houses. Now and then he passed one that was occupied, the family sitting out on the lawn, and once someone called his name, reminding him that the school had started without him. The air was fresh and crisp, the light glimmering off the pavements with an unusual intensity.

Within ten minutes he realised that he had wandered into an unfamiliar part of the town and completely lost himself, with only the aerial lines of watch-towers to guide him, but he still refused to look up at them.

He had entered a poorer quarter of the town, where the narrow empty streets were separated by large waste dumps,

and tilting wooden fences sagged between ruined houses. Many of the dwellings were only a single storey high, and the sky seemed even wider and more open, the distant watch-towers along the horizon like a continuous palisade.

He twisted his foot on a ledge of stone, and hobbled painfully towards a strip of broken fencing that straddled a small rise in the centre of the waste dump. He was perspiring heavily, and loosened his tie, then searched the surrounding straggle of houses for a way back into the streets through which he had come.

Overhead, something moved and caught his eye. Forcing himself to ignore it, Renthall regained his breath, trying to master the curious dizziness that touched his brain. An immense sudden silence hung over the waste ground, so absolute that it was as if some inaudible piercing music was being played at full volume.

To his right, at the edge of the waste ground, he heard feet shuffle slowly across the rubble, and saw the elderly man in the shabby black suit and wing collar who usually loitered outside the public library. He hobbled along, hands in pockets an almost Chaplinesque figure, his weak eyes now and then feebly scanning the sky as if he were searching for something he had lost or forgotten.

Renthall watched him cross the waste ground, but before he could shout the decrepit figure tottered away behind a ruined wall.

Again something moved above him, followed by a third sharp angular motion, and then a succession of rapid shuttles. The stony rubbish at his feet flickered with the reflected light, and abruptly the whole sky sparkled as if the air was opening and shutting.

Then, as suddenly, everything was motionless again.

Composing himself, Renthall waited for a last moment. Then he raised his face to the nearest watch-tower fifty feet above him, and gazed across at the hundreds of towers that hung from the clear sky like giant pillars. The haze had vanished and the shafts of the towers were defined with unprecedented clarity.

As far as he could see, all the observation windows were open. Silently, without moving, the watchers stared down at him.

—J. G. Ballard

It isn't often that Fate gets the better of Hek Belov, our celebrated cyberneticist, but in this new adventure he is dealt several cruel blows.

UNDER THE LEMONADE HAT

BY EDWARD MACKIN

I leant against the artificial stone balustrade on Third Level and watched, with a jaundiced eye, the case-hardened cohorts of Industry's top echelon streaming into *Erg Hall*. A memorial dinner was being held there in honour of the late Max Grappitt, posthumously awarded the Bold Foundation Prize for wage-minimizing, which the unenlightened call sweat-boxing.

I had no hatred for them. It was just that I felt they might be more cognizant of the genius in their midst. There I was, friends, the greatest cyberneticist the world has ever known, within fair spitting distance of them, and they passed me by as though I were merely part of the scenery.

"Look," I said to one of them, "what's the hurry? A big, sick baboon like you couldn't go downhill any faster if he tried. So why don't you do something useful with your money like tying it round your flabby neck and jumping in the river?"

I must remember not to think aloud. He turned on me right away.

"How dare you?" he shouted, directing his bulging, veiny eyes at me. "I've a good mind to have you arrested! Police!" he bellowed, putting his hands to his mouth. "Police!"

He was obviously not a man to waste time. I shot along the Level and out of sight; but ten minutes later I was back. I was attracted to the place like a moth to a lamp. It was the money I think. To tell the truth, friends, I was beating my brains out for some way to lay my hands on just a little of it.

I watched Sir John Harkoyle arrive. He was the chairman of Titanium and Allied Products. Leaving his luxurious helijet he strode purposefully across the Square and into the Hall. And then it came to me!

"Belov, you dog," I thought, "you've got them on toast!"

The new economy drive was in full swing, and the illumination almost at crash point. So, from where I was standing in the semi-darkness, I was fairly certain that the doorman at *Erg Hall* hadn't seen me. I approached him now at a cracking pace, and tried to push past him. He held on to me, of course.

"Here, what's this?" he asked. "Who are you? Where's your invitation card?"

"I haven't one," I told him. "I'm Sir John Harkoyle's private secretary, and I must see him at once."

He glanced back towards the inner doors and hesitated; but the last thing I wanted was for him to summon Sir John.

"Never mind," I said, quickly. "There really isn't time. I have to get back to see what can be saved from the general collapse."

His eyes widened. "Collapse?" he echoed.

I nodded and took him by the arm. "The whole Titanium empire has collapsed," I said. "Someone has discovered that most of the bigger asteroids are practically pure Titanium. A new company has been formed and they are going to mine it at the present price of copper. I have to rush off now. Get the information to Sir John; but tell no-one else. We don't want any panic selling."

He had a deep, bass voice, and I estimated that any confidential whisper of his should carry at least twenty-five yards. I left him and went to the nearest callbox. It was not only the nearest, it was the only one in the immediate vicinity of the Hall. I waited there, pretending to be looking through the directory.

The rush on the box took even me by surprise. At least thirty desperate men in dark, formal wear, came tearing round the corner in a compact bunch. They bore down on the public video, and fought to get in the box with me.

"Gentlemen !" I shouted, indignantly. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait. This is an emergency. My dear old grannie has accidentally spiked her grog with gripe-water. I'm phoning for a stomach pump, and half a case of Scotch."

They never understood a word of it. They were too busy pulling out their wallets and flourishing paper money in my face. "Ten pounds !" yelled someone at the back of the struggling mass. Immediately someone raised him another ten. I could have upped the bidding to four figures given another three minutes ; but I spotted Sir John himself belting towards the box with the doorman following him, so I just grabbed a bundle of notes from the nearest hand, squeezed out of the box, and ran for it.

The pedstrip was almost three-hundred yards away ; but I made it in classic style with a clear lead. After satisfying myself that I really had shaken my pursuers I checked on the amount I had managed to snatch, and was horrified to discover that all I held in my hand was a sheaf of cream-coloured note-paper. The information contained in the thin, spidery scrawl on the paper was probably worth a million ; but I let the pieces flutter from my almost nerveless hand, and watched them like an idiot as they were blown over the Level by the strong breeze.

"You can't always win," said a mocking voice to my left.

It was Meerschraft ; as fast, as amiable, and probably as incompetent as ever. He came over to me, and stood there grinning.

"If I'd known you were within ten miles of this place," I told him, "I'd have brought my rabbit's foot. There's no luck where you are."

"That was quite a chase," he observed. "What happened ? Did you lay your hooks on the gentleman's love letters ? Tch, tch ! That's not like you, Belov. I thought you went in exclusively for treasury notes. Or could it be that you need glasses ?"

"It could be," I snarled ; "but that's not your worry, Meerschraft. You've got eyes like a Peruvian pack rat !"

"There's no need to get sore with me," he said, and thrust a fiver into my hand. "Here's a little consolation prize. Don't worry," he added, as I gazed at it in astonishment, "It's

genuine, and there are more to follow. All I want you to do is help me out. I've been looking for you most of the afternoon."

"Help you out of what?" I demanded. "I know you, Meerschraft. A hole that deep would daunt a spelaeologist." I thrust the note back at him. "Nothing doing," I said. "This time of the year the gaols are very damp, and the food's terrible."

He put his hand up. "No, no. You keep it." He sounded hurt. "If you don't wish to help me it's quite all right. I suppose I can call in another cyberneticist. It's just that I thought of you first. If one can't extend a helping hand without arousing unfounded suspicions . . ."

"For heaven's sake!" I exclaimed, cutting him short. "You'll have me in tears. Very well, Meerschraft, I know I'll regret it, but what's your problem?"

He brightened up immediately. "It's an automatic tailoring rig. A very special job. My client was given first refusal at the sale of his late cousin's effects sight unseen as they say, and this was one of the items he found himself with. You must remember the late Grant Eastley. He was something of an eccentric; but a genius, too. He died about three months ago."

"I remember him," I nodded. "Who doesn't? He was the lemonade hat merchant."

"That's right. He wore it everywhere. It had lemonade powder around the upturned rim, and a tube leading to his mouth. He reckoned to get lemonade when it rained. It was just his fun, of course. He spent a fortune on his inventions; but he never tried to commercialize them."

"Maybe it's just as well. The demand for lemonade hats seems to have declined. And what about his reversible bed? And his disposable paper house. The man was a latter-day goon."

"Yes," agreed Meerschraft, "I grant you that; but he did invent other things, and one of these was the auto-tailor."

"That's not new," I pointed out. "The *Sixty-Minute-Tailors* use auto machines."

"There's a difference. This is no ordinary tailoring machine. The suits are cut from a special material, inter-woven with fine wire, which draws the strands together when a current is applied at certain points. It gives what Eastley calls muscle-lift. In other words, it helps a man when he's walking or running, and so on. The actual movements are decided by a governor

switchbank, which is informed by any slight directional tendencies on the part of the wearer. Any reverse movement cancels the lift, and sets the pull the other way. This all according to his notes and instructions. The trouble is that the power unit and the selector gear are not very compact. In fact they weigh somewhere around fifty to sixty pounds. I'm sure they could be scaled down, though."

"I'm sure they could," I said; "but that would spoil Eastley's little joke. So you've never actually had a suit from this monster?"

"In sixty seconds!" Meerschraft said, enthusiastically. "The material appeared to be quite ordinary worsted, with perhaps some nylon. The suit was rather less ordinary, though." This fact seemed to sadden him. "It was about five feet wide with eighteen-inch legs."

"You keyed your own measurements then?"

He frowned at me. "I did key my own measurements; but I am not five feet wide. I tried keying the measurements for a taller man, a normal six-footer. The suit that slid out had an inside leg length of forty inches, and a chest width of fifteen." He brightened again. "But just think of it, Belov. A suit every sixty seconds. Get it working properly and the big tailors will fall on their knees to buy it."

"You can regard it as done," I assured him. "I know exactly where the trouble lies."

"Good, good!" he smiled, rubbing his hands together as though he had just pulled off a difficult deal. "I knew you'd help me."

I should have known better, of course, and made some act of propitiation to whatever malicious spirit it is that waits with extended foot for those who even try to help him. The man's a positive Jonah.

The auto-tailor had been stored in a disused building on Second Level that had once housed the Golden Hill Essence Distillers and Yental Spices Company. The strange, rich aromas were still there, pleasant and evocative. They reminded me how grievously unprovided for is our olfactory sense.

Video, in brilliant colour, assaults the eyes. Almost everything we eat is tailored to titillate our taste buds. There are roughnesses, and smoother than smooth smoothnesses, hot water, icy showers, the feel of fine garments, and of flesh against

flesh—all these to jolly up our tactile sense. To keep us aurally happy there is, of course, music. Yet the nose, generally speaking, is ignored. The Arabians of old, with their little boxes of assorted perfumes and spices just for sniffing, had the edge on us there. Having rather more than my share of nose I find it saddening that, while there are a thousand scented symphonies waiting to be written, the old 'flu trap,' if I may so phrase it, falls gradually into desuetude.

My friends, we neglect even the most humble of the senses at our peril. How many senses, I wonder, did Man start with or, to restate it for the evolutionists among us, how many did he acquire and then discard on the way? More than five. Certainly more than five, and because of this there are things undreamt of all around us; just within reach—and unattainable.

To tell the truth, friends, the all-pervading odour for me as I entered the place was that of fish, metaphorically speaking, of course. The machine stretched along almost the whole of one wall, and it was fenced in with heavy, plastic-covered wire netting, and roofed over with the same material. Set in the middle of this was a door, heavily padlocked. I noticed, too, a modern sporting gun on a nearby bench, and here and there around the walls were marks that suggested rather more than a little haphazard firing.

"Whose is the gun?" I inquired.

"Crope's. He likes to get a little practice in when he can. He's a keen sportsman."

I looked around suspiciously. "He seems to have been using a moving target."

"Something of the kind," said Meerschraft. He handed me a key. "Let yourself in," he directed with a forced laugh. "You'll find everything to hand. I have some rather urgent business to attend to; but I'll be back in a couple of hours."

He made for the door at a fairly sharp pace; but I got there before him, and detained him by spreading myself across the exit.

"All right," I said, "you blubber-gutted circuit-wrecker. Let's have the truth. What's so scary about this job that you can't keep your great, big feet from heading away from it?" I nodded towards the machine, and he shot a quick, half-frightened glance in the same direction. "I know a cage when I see one; but what's in there that I can't see?"

"Nothing," he denied. "I really did have some business to transact ; but I suppose it can wait. Really, Belov, I assure you that any suspicions you may have are without basis. There *were* other snags, or perhaps I should say some inexplicable phenomena ; but it might not happen again, and I'm quite sure you are capable of sorting it all out."

I handed him the key. "Open up," I directed. He looked at the key, and shrugged his shoulders, as one who accepts the inevitable. "Very well," he agreed.

We went back across the room and he opened the door. He glanced back at me as if to say something, but changed his mind and went in. "I'll just switch on," he said, "and then I'm coming out, so leave the door wide. There's really no danger ; but if something does occur it might be very disconcerting, and I'd like to be outside."

I stayed outside just in case, and watched him shove the main switch in and then make some adjustments before switching on the auto-tailor itself by pressing a blue start button. He came out so fast after that that he bumped into me and we fell to the floor, rolling over and over, while he cursed me roundly. Finally, we managed to disentangle ourselves and got to our feet.

"Close the door !" he said, backing away from it.

I backed away with him. As we passed the bench he picked up the sporting gun. I could hear the machine humming slightly, and now and then there were a series of clicking noises. I kept my eye on the delivery chute. Something slid down on to the table beneath it. Meerschraft lowered the gun, and sighed his relief. We went back into the enclosure and he picked the object up. It was a perfectly ordinary suit, and it had been delivered in sixty seconds, which was quite something.

"Still a bit on the big side," he remarked. "It must be the computer."

I was about to agree with him when something came out of the delivery chute and winged its way around the netting until it reached the door. It shot through this and ran out into the main room. It looked like a large, black bat. Meerschraft brought up his gun and fired at it as it hurtled around the walls. Several more of these things flew out of the machine and straight at us. We ducked and they went out through the doorway, followed by a monstrous *thing* that vaguely resembled

a moth ; but was quite three feet across and hideously coloured yellow, brown and grey with purple spots on the fluttering wings.

I knocked the switch off, and Meerschraft closed the door. He was sweating slightly. " God damn him," he said, bitterly, " wherever he is !" He poked the gun through the netting and took a shot at the moth, which exploded with an intense red fire centre and enough noise to shake the windows. The other things were all over the place, but one by one they found the outer door, which we had left open, and flapped and fluttered through it to the Level. He gave me a cigarette, took one himself, and lit it with a trembling hand.

" Quite a snag," I said. " Meerschraft, you dog, you almost tricked me ! You were going to leave me with those things, weren't you ? I could have been torn to pieces !"

" I'm sorry about that," he apologised ; " but I thought that if there was anyone able to cope with such a situation it would be you. Perhaps you don't appreciate my position. This whole thing has cost Croke something like three-thousand, and he's a man who expects results. You see, I'm afraid he bought on advice from me. I managed to get a sneak preview of the stuff, including some of Eastley's plans and notebooks. It looked astonishingly good, and I advised him accordingly. He's not been here since the thing was installed ; but he's due here tomorrow."

" I thought you said that that was his gun."

Meerschraft shook his head. " Actually, it belongs to a friend of mine. I borrowed it to provide me with some form of protection. I still don't know what those things really are. When you manage to wing them they blow up, and there's nothing left."

I went out on to the Level. There was no sign of the winged creatures. They'd probably flown straight out to sea. The prevailing wind was that way. I came back in again, and lit the cigarette he'd given me.

" Now then," I said. " Let's try and work this thing out before we open Pandora's box. I don't suppose you've even glanced inside."

" I gave it some external tests, and switched it on. It seemed to work all right apart from the computer distortion. After those things came at me I wasn't at all keen to poke my nose into a dead man's dreamland."

"Remember old Bill Occam, and his razor," I said. "Never multiply entities beyond necessity."

"I think I'll join a monastic order," observed Meerschraft, morosely. "Civilisation has suddenly become too much for me."

"Hold on," I advised him. "It can't last much longer. It contains the seeds of its own destruction—you and me."

Playing it safe I found the main switch and knocked it off. Then I had a closer look at the auto-tailor. Keeping clear of the delivery chute I removed the inspection panels, and had a peek inside. I was looking at a mass of complicated machinery; but just behind the delivery chute, and under the cloth feed was something that didn't gell with the general layout. It was a three-foot-six aperture with a shutter that could be operated by pulling on a lever that didn't have anything to do with the felling of suits. The aperture was extra, too.

I locked the shutter by tying down the lever, and then did a bit of excavating with screwdriver and spanner, removing a couple of plates either side of the mysterious slot, and then two thumbscrews below these and to the rear of the curving extra chute, which was what it was. Finally, I pulled on the thing and it swung forward.

Below, neatly packed and sprung for instant delivery was as neat a collection of plastic monsters as ever inhabited a lemonade hat. Very carefully, I removed the top one which was a kind of silvery dragon fly about two-feet wide. It was powered with a mini-jet of the kind used on model heli-cars. The body was probably packed with combustibles; maybe the wings were loaded, too. I wasn't prepared to perform an autopsy.

"What have you got there?" asked Meerschraft, looking over my shoulder.

"One of our winged friends," I said, casually, and handed it to him.

He looked at it in astonishment for a couple of seconds as though he didn't believe it, then flung it from him. "You swine, Belov!" he told me, and dropped to the floor.

I ducked as the silvery insect came straight for me. It bounced around the wire enclosure until it found the door and and shot outside. I watched it circuit the room a couple of times, and then it went through the door that led on to the Level, and disappeared. I helped Meerschraft to his feet.

"Now then," I said, "I think I can show you something really spectacular." I made a few adjustments, leaving the shutter in the open position. "All right," I nodded. "That should fix it." I pressed the blue start button, and leapt for the door.

We went through it practically together, and Meerschraft carried straight on across the room. I stayed pressed against the wire netting and watched the fantastic stream of giant plastic insects, bats, and other queer creatures that were a mongrel mixture of both plus something nightmarishly alien that I preferred not to think about. Again Meerschraft threw himself to the floor, and Eastley's bestiary tore over him, circled around, bouncing off the walls, and went out through the open door.

"Good," I said, with some satisfaction, "that's got the thing debugged. Tomorrow I'll have a go at the computer."

Meerschraft hoisted himself off the floor and staggering over to the bench, leant against it while he gazed around with a kind of haunted look. "I wish I'd never met you, Belov," he said, weakly. "But, whatever happens, I've got to get this machine working by tomorrow. Crope will be here in the morning. Can't we carry on?"

I shook my head. "Tomorrow. I have to eat, and it's getting on for ten o'clock. Lock the cage before you leave. You never know what that lemonade hatter might still have in the lining."

I left him feverishly fumbling with the lock, and made my way out to the Level. I took the fast East pedstrip, and an earnest young man with prominent teeth got into conversation with me.

"Did you see those horrors?" he asked. "They came flying straight down the strip. Bats, and moths, and some things you wouldn't shake a stick at. Some of them were three-feet across." I didn't have to say anything, he was so full of it. "An old lady standing next to me fainted. I mean, I've heard of birds migrating; but these weren't birds, mister. A whole swarm of them. The last I saw they were heading out to sea. Where, I keep asking myself, did they come from? The Government should do something about it." He shook his head, solemnly, from side to side. "Allow these awful things to propagate and there'll be no room for us in the world. Positively no room. They'll be everywhere. Half a mile deep

I shouldn't be surprised, and in a very short while. That's not right, you know."

I nodded. "Just what the saurians might have said about Man—and how right they would have been. But the way things are shaping along, the talking ape will go the way of the dumb dinosaur, and the world will then be safe for the meek to inherit—for the bats, the birds, and the bunnies, to say nothing of the bugs."

He moved away from me, and got off the strip. I think I must have upset him. The trouble is that lack of food always makes me feel pessimistic. At that moment I couldn't see any future for mankind, and I wasn't even disturbed.

I managed to get to Emilio's before he closed, and strode in with the air of a man who has money. The place was fairly full, but there was a table near the kitchen end. I walked towards it, glancing at the snack counter where Emilio usually presided. He was making frantic hi-signs to me and nodding towards a tall, grey-haired man with the stamp of officialdom on his firm, full face. He turned suddenly, caught Emilio in the act and, allowing himself a brief smile, came across to me.

"Could I have a word with you, sir?" he asked, politely.

"Sorry," I apologised, backing off. "I'm a very busy man. I'm just off to Patagonia."

I turned to make a dash through the door; but I found my way blocked by another, younger, man who had been sitting at a convenient table. The craft of the swine!

"You are Hek Belov, I take it?" said the elder man catching up with me.

"Never in my life," I denied. "It's just a vicious slander put about in order to ruin me. My name is Wright. No relation to the air pioneers; but I have a brother of the same appellation, and an auntie in Michigan who knits sporrans for the reservation Eskimos. What did you say your name was?" If you can't convince them confuse them.

The two men looked at each other in a puzzled way and, in that instant, while their attention was diverted, I belted through the door and jumped the nearest pedstrip, landing on my hands and knees.

"Did you see those bandits?" I said to the gaping commuters. "They were after my pocket-book. Something should be done about it," I urged them, as I got to my feet.

"It happens all the time. We should form a Public Protection Committee. I suggest ten-shillings apiece just to get it going."

I took off my hat, and went around with an earnest expression ; but they gazed at me stonily, and I had to give up. I don't think they believed me, or maybe it was just plain apathy. In any case, friends, such a lack of public spirit is nothing short of disgusting. A bit further on I changed to the fast West, and alighted at Fourth District, taking the grav-lift to Third Level, where I had an uninteresting meal in a cheap restaurant.

I left there and went to the cunningly-named *New Yorker* for a couple of drinks. This is not, as most Americans are prone to think, connected with their fantastic city or way of life. The place is dedicated to the bygone greats of cricket, a yorker being a ball that pitches immediately under the bat. After my fourth double I raised my glass to the hairy visage of W. G. Grace, who gazed down rather sardonically from a place over the main bar.

"God rest you, sir," I said ; "but the Chinese whacked the hides off us at your favourite game last week, and the Russians are demanding a change in the rules. They want more umpires and fewer players." I winked at him. "I think you had the best of it. What came after wasn't a bit like cricket." I ordered another drink, and while the barmaid was getting it I spoke from behind my hand to the great doctor. "They are thinking of introducing a kind of plastic bat," I informed him.

The picture fell with a crash, and the girl screamed. I decided that perhaps I wouldn't have another drink after all, and left. A white-haired gentleman near the Pavilion end glared at me as I passed, and murmured something about its being damned bad form. I had, it seemed unwittingly strayed into the last stronghold of the English.

The next morning I had some strong, black coffee, which I needed, and a luke-warm shower, which is part of an established ritual, and rode the Levels to the *Golden Hill Essence Distillers* where I found Meerschraft in a state of funk bordering on panic.

"It caught fire !" he wailed. "What am I going to do ? What will Croke say ? He'll be here any time now."

It seemed that Meerschraft had switched on at the mains, and there had been an explosion, which had set fire to a piece of loose cloth ; but he'd managed to put the flames out with a

bucket of water and some sand that happened to be handy. I removed the inspection panels and had a look inside. Meerschraft's worst fears were realised. It was a complete wreck. The delicate machinery that could turn a suit out in sixty seconds was twisted and broken ; a heap of bent and buckled levers, cogs, pins, and hold plates.

"Explosion was right," I said.

"Can it be repaired?" inquired Meerschraft, fearfully.

I shook my head. "No," I told him, "it's been really hit and scattered, and all the king's horses and all the king's men, and you and me both can take a vacation." I stood up and removed my hat in mock respect.

This was the last straw for poor Meerschraft. He rushed at the machine and kicked it. Then he hopped and limped about the enclosure, until the pain had subsided, cursing the auto-tailor, Croke, old Belov, and his own horrible luck for having been lumbered with such a set-up.

"Tcha !" I said. "Such a fuss. Just bolt the door, and put the lights out. If Croke arrives he'll think the lock's stuck. That should give us a breathing space to think something out."

Meerschraft saw the sense of this, and while he was busy attending to it I began sherlocking around the wrecked cloth-spoiler. It wasn't long before I spotted something. The node point of the explosion was a pair of fuses situated just above the left-hand inspection panel. My guess was that the cartridges had been more than mere fuses, and the flashing fuse wire had fired what had probably been two high explosive pellets.

"When you switched on," I told Meerschraft, "there was a sudden surge of current which blew the internal fuses. It could have happened any time ; but that lemon-headed maniac had fixed an explosive charge in place of the safety cartridges."

"What do we do now?" asked Meerschraft, hopelessly.

"Video Croke," I said. "What's his number?"

"Central X40 ; but I don't understand."

"When he gets here," I explained, "he should be in quite a tizzy. That's if I can catch him before he leaves." I grinned at him. "He's going to be very upset when he finds you lying dead across the machine."

"Dead !" echoed Meerschraft. He sounded alarmed.

"What are you up to, Belov ? Why should I be dead?"

"Because you've been electrocuted. Croke will be so scared of having to pay out what could amount to substantial damages

that when I resuscitate you after a pretty gory operation he should be putty in our hands. I shall operate on you with a pocket knife, so that I can massage your heart. I think I can guarantee to make it a pretty gory business. He might be prevailed upon to pay a little on the side just to hush it up. After all, he's operating a garmenter without a factory licence."

Meerschraft backed away from me. "You must be mad, Belov!" he said. "I'm not being electrocuted, and then cut open just to put money in your pocket. I'd rather go to gaol."

"You've got it all wrong," I soothed him. "Simmer down, there's a good fellow. I only want you to sham dead."

"That's ridiculous! We'll never get away with it."

I ignored his bleating. "Where're those artifur gloves I saw you with on the Level? Hand them over."

He took them from his topcoat pocket, and gave them to me. "You go off at such a tangent," he complained, "that no rational mind can follow you. What do you want them for?"

I gathered together a little heap of paper and some oily rag, and set fire to it. When it was blazing satisfactorily I put the gloves on. Until that moment Meerschraft had been watching in a bewildered fashion; but now he leapt forward with a cry of rage.

"What the hell are you doing, Belov?"

I held him off until the gloves were charred black, and horrible to look at, like the twisted paws of some unfortunate gorilla.

"Beautiful!" I pronounced, removing the gloves, and carefully treading the fire out. "When they've cooled you can put them on," I told Meerschraft. "Then you can black your face a bit and lie across the machine as though you've just provided a pleasant passage to earth for a grateful five-hundred volts. Crope won't go near you. You'll look too damned horrible!"

"Those gloves cost me a tenner," he said, resentfully.

"They were sacrificed in a good cause," I pointed out. "He's likely to sue you for misrepresentation, and criminal incompetence. You'd probably end up owing him around ten-thousand quid."

Despite his protests we set the scene, and I stood back and eyed it, critically. Meerschraft lay twisted across the auto-tailor. The side of his face that could be seen was blackened and swollen. (He had a wad of paper stuffed in his cheek.)

One shoe was missing, and he lay very still. His hands were what caught the eye, though. They were wrapped about a heavy wire that led nowhere, and they were almost shapeless, black lumps that were barely recognisable as perhaps having once been human.

They added just that extra touch that lent credence to the whole production. I was proud of those hands. They represented that little extra something that distinguishes a work of art from the merely competent. It was, I felt, the definitive version of this kind of set-up, and I was only sorry that I had been unable to find any red fluid for the emergency heart operation ; but you can't have everything, and I had modified my plans accordingly. I had to approach quite close to Meerschraft, who looked exceptionally dead, to reassure myself that he hadn't succumbed to more than realism.

"I'll get Croke over here now," I said. "This should knock him four ways to Easter. The operation is out ; but he should drop me a couple of hundreds for getting rid of the body."

Meerschraft shuddered. "If he sees through it they'll fling us both in gaol, and throw the key away," he moaned. "I don't know why I listen to you, Belov. It nearly always ends with me holding the short straw. I must be soft in the head."

I found a public video and buzzed Croke's number. Presently, an oddly familiar face flicked on to the screen. I flipped over a few recent events, and then I recollected where I had seen it before. I was looking at the flabby cheeks and bulging eyes of the man I had called a big, sick baboon only the previous evening. He hadn't liked me then. I didn't expect him to like me any better now.

"Benjamin Croke," he stated, flatly, and then he frowned. "I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I? What do you want?"

"An undertaker, I think," I informed him. "But you'll do for now. You'd better come over right away to the warehouse where you've got that misbegotten auto-tailor. Meerschraft just connected himself into the mains supply circuit. The fuses held ; but he went." I took my hat off and placed it on my chest. "He'll be sadly missed," I added, sombrely.

His eyes bulged a little more with alarm. "Who are you? No, never mind that. He's not . . . not . . . Damn it, man, he's not dead is he?"

"As an iron dog," I told him.

He cursed his luck and switched off. I went back to Meerschraft. "It won't be long now," I said.

He groaned. "I'm getting cramp. Can't I get up for a minute?"

"Out of the question, Croke will be bursting through that door any minute now."

The further complication that he might recollect the circumstances of our meeting the previous evening was disquieting. He might throw caution to the winds and bring the police along ; but I was in too deep to make a run for it.

A couple of minutes later the door was flung open and there stood Croke. I went towards him. "Where is he?" he demanded, and then he spotted him. "Great heavens!" he exclaimed. "I was hoping it might have been a hoax." He turned and signalled to someone on the Level. "In here!" he shouted. "Bring your equipment."

Three very purposeful looking men in white coats, and a competent-looking nurse crowded into the room followed by a couple of stretcher bearers, and another half-dozen men in brown coats who were toting a mass of electro-mechanical equipment, including a portable operation table. It was a full crash medical unit. Meerschraft wasn't going to be allowed to stay dead. Not if Croke knew it.

One of the doctors began issuing crisp instructions. "Table about here. Get the instruments ready, nurse." He adjusted his stethoscope. "I'll just make sure ; but I must say he looks dead enough."

Suddenly Meerschraft could stand it no longer. He leapt to his feet with a wild cry, and bolted for the door ; but tripped over an oxygen bottle, and fell flat on his face. One of the gloves had slipped off his hand, and the doctor turned him over. Meerschraft sat up then, and looked around somewhat fearfully.

"It seems that we have been the victims of a stupid hoax," observed the doctor, grimly. "There's nothing wrong with this man unless, possibly, he is *non compos mentis*." He glared at Croke. "You can rest assured that I shall bring this matter to the notice of the proper authorities," he told him, stiffly.

"And very right, too," I nodded. "This is a scandalous business."

I frowned at Croke. My position wasn't too clear ; but I wasn't on his side.

"Now look here . . ." commenced Croke.

The doctor ignored him and strode out of the room. The rest of the unit followed with scarcely a word ; but their faces spoke volumes. For rather less than two pins I believe they would have been pleased to operate on all three of us. I was relieved to see the door close behind them.

There was what is sometimes referred to as a pregnant silence, and I was uneasily aware that both men were looking at me.

"I was merely passing," I said, "And I heard the screams." I glanced at Meerschraft. "I hope you get better soon, my poor fellow," I told him. "I shall have to go now. I have a pressing commitment."

"I've got you now," said Croke, with a mirthless smile. "we met for the first time last evening, and I was forced to call the police."

"Call them again," urged Meerschraft before I could move off. "It's all his doing. He railroaded me into it after wrecking the auto-tailor."

A gentleman, it is said, takes everything in his stride, and I have always prided myself on being a gentleman. I strode over to Meerschraft and, taking him by the coat, dragged him to his feet.

"Liar !" I accused. "Ingrate ! Bladder-head ! If knowledge really were power you wouldn't have enough to activate a super-sensitive galvanometer. Tcha !" I flung him from me, and turned to Croke. "Call the police," I said ; "but that won't get you your money back."

"You had something else in mind, Mr. er, what was your name ?"

"Hek Belov," Meerschraft told him. It wasn't the name I had in mind.

"Well, Mr. Belov," said Croke, still with that mirthless smile nailed to his face. "I don't have to point out the precarious nature of your position. I should be able to make out several charges, one at least of which should carry with it the possibility of a heavy prison sentence." He was enjoying himself.

"You, too," he told Meerschraft. "Deception and criminal incompetence adds up to fraud in my world. There is misappropriation of certain moneys, too, unless of course you are able to return the amount advanced." Meerschraft shook his head, miserably. "Well, now," continued Croke, "either I

get my money back with due interest, or I shall have to place the whole thing in the hands of the police. It seems to me that you might make some special effort to get the machine working. Do I make myself clear?"

"As triple-distilled vitriol," I said, "you pop-eyed, money-grubbing miser."

He showed his false teeth in a grimace that was half snarl, and half amusement. "Fix it!" he grated. "Or I'll fix you both."

I looked at the auto-tailor. Its appearance was impressive; as impressive as Napoleon's tomb, and just about as useful. There was still the computer, though. It might be possible to recoup his losses on that. That, of course, was reckoning without Grant Eastley. He had the idiot-genius of a foxy-moron, and one never knew what surprises lay in store.

"Well," I said, "the chances are approximately half of zero; but it appears that I have no alternative. Cataclysmic, or whatever, anything that happens from now on is your joint responsibility."

The odd thing about the computer end was that there just wasn't an inspection panel, and not even a joint.

"It looks like a welded job," ventured Meerschraft. "How are you supposed to service it?"

"You use a snicker-snee," I said, snapping my teeth at him, "and cut along the fourth dimension. That brings you out ten years ago tomorrow except on Fridays when you can earn promotion."

Something always turns up if you think about or around the problem long enough. I had the disadvantage that Croke was breathing down my neck; but I also had a fairly good slant on the mental processes of the late, unlamented, Grant Eastley. I began doodling on the computer keyboard, following out a certain line of thought, and using digits to represent the letters of alphabet. Nothing happened for a while, and then I tapped out: "Open Sesame."

Part of the casing opened upwards, and I was looking into a kind of recess. What was inside had no apparent connection with any computer that I have ever encountered. It appeared to be some kind of *camera obscura*. I took a closer look. Before me was spread part of the Level just outside with people walking towards the nearby pedstrip, or entering from

nowhere, and unconcernedly traversing the circle of light to step out beyond it into darkness. The mannikin images were about three inches tall. I thrust my hand into the magic circle and watched, fascinated, as a young girl apparently walked across my palm. A modern and probably electronic version of an old toy ; but still strangely wonderful. Once I thought I saw the man who had tackled me in Emilio's ; but he had vanished before I could be certain.

"What the hell's this ?" demanded Croke.

"It's a video of some kind, isn't it ?" said Meerschraft, uncertainly.

"I'll explain later," I promised. "The jackpot question is what did friend Eastley have in mind ?"

To the left of the image base was an opalite panel with two black control knobs, and a red switch button. Below these was a jockey-stick control with four positions. Moving it shifted the image along the Level in any desired direction. I tried the left-hand knob next, and turned it slowly clockwise. There was an immediate click as a switch came into action. A narrow beam of intensely blue light was projected on to the circle where people hurried about their business, or dawdled, or looked anxiously at their watches as though time was being doled out to them in inverse ratio to requirements.

Turning the knob caused the blue beam to traverse from left to right, or back the other way. I tried the other knob again and found that it pulled the beam the opposite way, so that by manipulating the two knobs together I was able to centre the blue ray on any spot in the circle. I found I could focus it on any of the little figures and it would lock there and automatically follow that person until he vanished into the blackness at the periphery.

"Do you think it takes photographs or something ?" asked Meerschraft, vaguely. "I wonder what the red button is for?"

We weren't left long in doubt. I'd just focussed the mysterious beam of blue light on to a poorly-dressed individual—a man perhaps in his fifties—who looked as though life had clobbered the hell out of him, and he still didn't know why ; then Meerschraft's fat finger came down on the red button. I blinked, unbelievably. This particular piece of human wreckage had gone, and the blue light played on a heap of old clothes, and a pair of shoes.

The auto-tailor commenced to hum and before I could consider what evasive action would be necessary under the circumstances something rolled from the delivery chute. It was the man whose clothes lay outside on the Level. He was wearing a smart, grey suit, and when he stood up I could see that it fitted perfectly.

"Must have had a blackout," he said, in a bemused fashion. "Thanks for helping me." He started to shuffle towards the door. Life had dealt him one more back-handed swipe, and he wasn't prepared to argue about it, or even bemoan his lot. Then he seemed to notice his bare feet for the first time. He pointed to them. "What happened to my shoes and socks?" he asked. He shivered and, opening his coat, looked open-mouthed at his bare flesh. "My shirt's gone!" he exclaimed. "And this is not my suit. This is a new one!"

I took him gently by the arm, and led him to the door. "You'll find everything outside," I told him. "And you can keep the suit as a present from the management. Come and see us again tomorrow and Mr. Benjamin Crope will make you a present of a hundred pounds."

I closed the door behind him, and went back to the other two. Crope seemed to be hypnotised by the *camera* very *obscura*. His pop eyes were alight with wonder.

"Amazing!" he kept saying. "Damned amazing!"

Meerschraft had something else on his mind. He had one of the inspection panels off the auto-tailor, and he was peering inside. I lit a cigarette and watched him.

"There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with it," he said in surprise. "That explosion wrecked it completely. We both know it did; but now there's no sign of its ever having happened. What do you make of that, Belov?"

Eastley wasn't catching me any more. I had begun to see how his tortuous, and somewhat alien, brain went about the task of nose-thumbing its own genius. The solution came to me like a snatch of verse to a poet; but to verify it would have meant getting too close to a machine which was, in effect, a transmutter. The transmission of minerals by electrical means is commonplace. Witness the electro-plating process. Transmission of minerals by radio is something else again. If, then, you consider the further complications of intelligent living matter, the possibility of ever constructing a transmutter for humans becomes ludicrously remote, to say the least of it.

Yet here we had one. Friends, I would have felt safer sitting astride a cobalt planet-buster. I don't know what kept me there, unless it was the fact that I had spotted someone on the image plate who looked remarkably like the gentleman who had wished to interview me in Emilio's. His being in the neighbourhood could have been purely fortuitous, and I had to give him time to get clear. Just the same caution was indicated. It wasn't that I was afraid ; but I had to consider the community at large. To deprive the country of my unique talents would have been nothing short of criminal. Meerschraft, I felt, was infinitely more expendable.

"Take the bottom panel off," I instructed him from a discreet distance, "and switch the inspection light on. Tell me what you see."

He did this, and turned to me in astonishment. "There's a very battered version of the auto-tailor rig under there. It's upside down."

"That's what I expected," I said. "That lemon-sucking gimmick-headed droll has done a reversible bed on us. The thing just turned over, and then over again. The explosion was probably window dressing."

"Do you realise what we have here ?" said Croke, excitedly.

"A transmutter," I told him.

He nodded his head. "The fictional miracle that no one ever really believed in. It must be worth millions !"

"How much is it worth to me ?" I inquired, feeling that I had caught him in a good, and perhaps generous mood.

"Not a damned penny !" he snarled. "You're lucky I didn't have you arrested." He took hold of the control knobs, and began to play about with the blue beam.

"Marvellous, isn't it ?" I said. "Twiddle the knobs a bit, select your customer, and hey presto ! he comes rolling out of the auto-tailor inside a suit that's a perfect fit ; but have you considered your precise position in law in relation to the abducting, kidnapping, or otherwise snaffling of unwilling adults ?"

He stopped fiddling with the controls and cogitated, drumming a tattoo on the casing with his fingers. "All right," he said, at last, "you can be the guinea pig. Just go outside on the Level, and I'll pick you up on the beam."

"Ask me again after the operation," I said. "I'm having my brains removed."

He shrugged his shoulders, and surveyed us, doubtfully. "It doesn't matter. What does matter though is that this thing seems stuck on the organic. What I want is something that will transport goods as well. The point is would it be possible to modify it?"

"Yes, of course," I said, quickly. "It would cost ten-thousand pounds. Say five thousand right away, and the rest tomorrow."

He glared at me. "Order what you require," he said, "and I'll pay for it; but I don't propose, Mr. Belov, to let either of you handle any more of my money." He lined the beam up.

"Another snatch?" I queried.

He smiled, horribly. "It's in the interests of science, and I can square him if necessary."

I looked over his shoulder, and Meerschraft joined me. The blue beam was locked on a tall gentleman who appeared to be heading straight for the building where we were. A quick scrutiny confirmed my worst suspicions. It was the character I had met in Emilio's.

"Not him!" I exclaimed; but Croke had pressed the button.

I pressed it again in the faint hope of halting the process. Something seemed to go mad inside the thing; and then the casing cracked like a great gun going off. The tiny images vanished along with the blue beam. Smoke began to issue from it at several points.

"What have you done?" screamed Croke, beside himself with rage and disappointment.

"I'm not sure," I returned, politely; "but I think you can say goodbye to that goldmine. You'll have to manage for a little while longer on your paltry few millions."

Croke was near apoplexy, and Meerschraft was fussing about like a distracted hen. There didn't seem to be any point in staying, so I stuck my hat on and left.

Outside on the Level a police officer was talking to a tall, naked man with grey hair. He was clutching his clothes to him and looking about at the gathering crowd like a trapped animal.

"I tell you I was struck by blue lightning!" he shouted at the uniformed officer. "Furthermore, I am detective-sergeant Thruston of Z Division."

He began to pull his nether garment on, and there was some giggling from the girls in the crowd. The policeman took off

his jacket and held it in front of the man as an inadequate screen.

"I've heard some stories," he said, sceptically ; " but yours wins the wooden Oscar. G'wan, beat it ! Ain't you never seen a man before ?"

"Disgusting !" I said, in a loud voice, as I passed.

The detective caught sight of me and instinct and training overcame his natural embarrassment at being in such a predicament.

"Just a minute !" he shouted, and with only one leg in his trousers started to pursue me.

The officer took him with a flying tackle, and they fell to the ground in a struggling heap.

"You've got the right man there, officer," I said. "Hold on to him while I go for help."

I caught the fast East and walked the last few yards to Emilio's. My mind was filled with pleasant thoughts of fried ham at least a quarter inch thick with perhaps three eggs and a plate of fresh rolls with butter, followed by cherry pie as only Emilio can cook it, and lots and lots of coffee.

As it happens I didn't make it to base. Thinking about these delightful comestibles caught me off guard. Just as I reached the door a grim looking giant of a man caught hold of my left arm. He regarded me with official detachment.

"You're Hek Belov, aren't you ?" he said. "Don't deny it, sonny boy," he added. "We've got your picture."

"I take a very bad picture," I informed him. "It's probably someone else."

He brought it out from an inside pocket, and showed it to me. "It's always someone else," he said, tiredly ; "but perhaps you recognise the number."

"Right across the chest," I nodded. "It spoils the whole effect. Would you like me to autograph it ?"

"No," he said, "you can save that for the statement. Just now we'd like you at headquarters. The chief has a few questions to ask you in connection with a sudden dip in titanium shares. He's a bit bothered about another little matter as well."

"It was a kind of joke," I said, desperately, slipping on a smile.

"Sir John Harkoyle isn't laughing," he told me.

"He'll have to prove that I made something from it," I pointed out. "Frankly, I wouldn't touch Titanium and Allied Products with a long pole. Auto-tailors are a bad investment, too. One false move and they go up in smoke."

The detective nodded. "So a certain Mr. Benjamin Croke was saying. That's the other little matter. There's an all stations alert out for you. Malicious damage is only one of the things Croke has slapped on your sheet. Did you know he's in line for mayor? The chief's got money on it, and he should know, being his cousin and everything, I mean," he grinned at me, "you should be more careful about the people you play patball with."

"There's no justice," I complained. "I was two sets in front, and then they altered the rules."

A riot can slid in and landed nearby. He urged me towards it. "You'll just have to learn to play it by ear," he said.

—Edward Mackin

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Most obscure writers seem to acquire fame and fortune after they are dead. Reginald Southern thought it would be nice to return in a hundred years and at least collect the royalties.

THE MAN WHO KNEW GRODNIK

THEODORE R. COGSWELL

"I'm sorry, Reggie,"—there was a note of tired compassion in the agent's voice—"if you could figure out some way to stick around for the next century or so you might find yourself back on top again. In the meantime, this is all that Stuart was able to line up for you. It's a killer—thirty-five bucks per and you pay your own expenses—but let's face it, the market for bosom buddies of famous Greenwich Village characters of the twenties has hit a new low. There's a whole new generation come up in the women's clubs that hasn't even heard of most of the people you talk about, let alone read them."

The slim man with silver grey hair who sat on the other side of the desk picked up the itinerary, leafed through it quickly, and then gave a convulsive shudder.

"Not Kansas again! Scott, you can't do this to me!"

"I don't like it any better than you do, but at least you'll be eating."

"Fried chicken and creamed peas with the Malthusian Ladies Guild of East Potlatch, Kansas," said Reginald gloomily. "You call that eating?"

The agent began to study the nails on his left hand. "Maybe next year something will break. Harrison still hasn't vetoed the idea of bringing out *Red Hot Mama* in his American Classics series." He took a quick look at his watch, stood up, and stretched out his hand.

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, Reggie—I'm really booked up solid today. Drop me a line when you find time. If anything comes of that American Classics deal I'll shoot you a wire."

Reginald Southern rose gracefully to his feet, flecked a speck of dust off a frayed cuff, and then gave his agent a jaunty wave.

"See you in a hundred years," he said. "When the royalties for *Red Hot Mama* start pouring in again, bank them for me, will you?"

When the long and garbled introduction was finally finished—for some reason or other the toastmistress insisted on confusing him with Rex Stout—Reginald rose to his feet, turned on his after-dinner smile, and beaming down on the perspiring pack of much-corseted females, delivered his opening line.

"Most of you are much too young to remember the fabulous nineteen twenties, but—" He paused automatically to let an appreciative twitter run through the audience. "But as John Barrymore said to me one evening when . . ."

He switched off conscious control and tried to ignore the sound of his own voice. The Barrymore story did make for a fast opening, but he always squirmed a little bit inside when he told it. Even though he hadn't written anything for twenty years, he had been a semi-great for a few months, and he had known a number of the real greats of the period, some of them quite well. His only meeting with Barrymore, however, had been a mumbled introduction at a cocktail party and an extremely short conversation.

"Hot, isn't it?" he'd said.

"Sure is," the great actor had agreed. "Makes me thirsty. Where's the bar?"

Reggie had pointed, Barrymore had nodded, and that had been the end of that.

The story he was telling was a true one, but the old friend he had been out with was John Grodnick, a poet nobody remembered anymore. The forgotten were not proper fare for women's clubs—they wanted speakers who would leave them with a vicarious feeling of having rubbed shoulders with the great—and each year Reggie found he had to switch more and more names around as the number of still living reputations from his period dwindled.

For a while he had been able to salve his own conscience by introducing only those he had had some contact with—at least by correspondence—but for his Ernest Hemingway story he could make no real defence. Aside from a few mutual friends, he had never had any contact with the writer.

He wanted to drop it, but he couldn't. Hemingway was known. Hemingway was still read. When he launched into the hilarious story about how the two of them had crashed the coming out party of Dorthy Fernis—ears always pricked up at this point, Dorthy had just divorced her fourth duke—dragging a protesting and still unknown Thomas Wolfe between them and introducing him as an illegitimate son of Kaiser Wilhelm, his audience always paid him the tribute of leaning forward eagerly. This is what they had paid for.

The passing of a hundred years had changed New York City. For one thing, it was now located in the middle of Pennsylvania. The Big War had altered the coastline enough, however, so that it was still a seaport town.

Reginald Southern drew a few curious looks as he stepped off the local belt at 34th Street—he was the only one in the crowd that was wearing any clothes—but nobody bothered him. New York still preserved its old tolerance for eccentrics.

Scott Akermann, Inc. was still in business. It took Reginald some time to talk his way past the robot secretary, but at last he found himself in the inner sanctum. A sudden wave of nostalgia swept over him as he looked around the office. Somehow the old desk had been salvaged, and the current Akermann bore a close resemblance to his great-grandfather to have been a younger brother.

"I'm afraid the message the secretary sent through was a bit garbled," said the agent politely. "Just who did you say you were again?"

Reginald drew the last of his cigarettes from its crumpled pack, put it in a stained ivory cigarette holder, and lit it with a

flourish. Nobody seemed to smoke any longer he had noted with regret, but then his doctor had been after him to quit for years.

"I am," he said with simple dignity, "Reginald Southern. *The Reginald Southern.*"

Akermann stared at him blankly.

Reginald gave a quiet little smile. "I dare say this is all going to be a bit of a shock, but it will clear up after you check the files. I am Reginald Southern, the author of *Red Hot Mama.*"

The agent's face cleared suddenly and his hand began to creep toward the button that would activate the automatic ejector.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Southern," he said, "but we never read unsolicited manuscripts. If yours hasn't been returned to you, you might check with the secretary on the way out to see if you enclosed sufficient return postage."

Reginald chuckled. It was going to be rather embarrassing for the agent when he realized who he was.

"Tell me, young man," he said. "Is the American Classics series still in existence?"

Akermann looked at him in surprise. "Of course. Why?"

A tremor of uneasiness ran through the writer. "The name Reginald Southern still doesn't mean anything to you?"

The agent's hand moved forward again until it hovered over the ejector button again. "Much as I hate to terminate this most interesting discussion," he said, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to . . ." He stopped suddenly. "What's your name got to do with the American Classics series?"

Reginald felt a sudden sinking feeling, but he didn't let it show. Instead he started to explain.

When, after a long search, the yellowed folder bearing the name SOUTHERN, REGINALD J. had been exhumed from the inactive file, and Reginald had answered the last of the questions on the test sheet smoothly and confidently, Scott Akermann sat rigid in his chair, obviously shaken. He pushed a faded clipping toward Reginald.

"But this says you were killed!"

Reggie skipped over the part which referred to him as an obscure village writer who had gained temporary notoriety in the mid-twenties when his novel *Red Hot Mama* was banned in Boston, and concentrated on the details of the accident.

"You'll note," he said when he had finished reading, "that this just says that I disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Tevis's body was found in the wreckage of his machine, but I wasn't. Luckily for me, the time field, or whatever it was he called it, had already formed around me when his dingbat blew up."

"Time travel!" said Akermann in an awed voice. "It's fantastic!" He gulped suddenly as a practical thought hit him. "This Tevis . . . did he explain how his machine worked?"

"He tried to," said the other apologetically, "but I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention. Things like that have always confused me. He did say something about squaring infinity . . . or was he unsquaring it? I do remember that he said he was doing something with it that nobody had ever thought of before."

"Anyway," continued Reggie, a far away look in his eyes, "it all started in Helopolis, Kansas. I hadn't seen Tevis since we were undergraduates together and you could have knocked me over with a feather when he came rushing up to me at the bus station and dragged me home with him."

"He was head of the Physics Department at Helopolis State Teachers College—in fact, he was the Physics Department. They also had him teaching Community Dynamics, Advanced Basket Weaving, and something called Project Four, Democracy at Work."

"Do go on," said Akermann. There was an acid note to his voice that jerked Reginald out of his digression.

"Anyway," he said hastily, "during all those years at Helopolis, Tevis had been tinkering away in his basement, trying to build a machine that would put his theory about time travel into practice. He'd just completed it when I hit town on my lecture tour."

"When we got to his house we settled down for a long talk about the old days, but after thirty years of moving in such completely different directions, we really didn't have much to talk about. The things I remembered he didn't—and *vice versa*—so we soon got around to our own troubles. He had his share, but at least he had tenure. Me, I was making my last round of the women's clubs, and I knew it."

"My place is in the future," I said. "It's just a matter of time before I'm rediscovered. But I'm fifty-four now. Look how long John Donne had to wait. What I need is some way to jump a hundred years into the future."

"Tevis didn't say anything for a moment. Then he jumped up with a wild look in his eyes and dragged me down into his basement. It was there he told me about his time machine. I really didn't believe it would work, but I was desperate enough to try anything. So I wrote a long letter to Scott—to your great-grandfather—mailed it, and then came back and sat down in an old swivel chair that was surrounded with loops and loops of silvery looking wire."

"And?"

"He pushed a button. It must have blown up just as it kicked me forward. I was hoping that *Red Hot Mama* would have been rediscovered and gone over well enough so that I would find a comfortable accumulation of royalties—and an established literary position—waiting for me." The writer paused and looked at the agent forlornly. "I guess I should have had Tevis set the machine for five hundred years. Look how long it took Chaucer."

In spite of everything he had gone through, Scott Akermann was still an agent. He hastily leafed through the folder until he found what he was looking for, pulled it out, and smoothed it reverently.

"What's that?" asked Reginald.

"Your original contract with Scott Akermann, Inc. I notice that it contains the usual twelve month cancellation clause. You didn't, did you?"

"Didn't what?"

"Give notice that you wanted to terminate your contract?"

Reginald shook his head.

Akermann began to beam. "I guess that legally I still represent you then." He coughed delicately. "There have been a few changes since your day. For one thing, the standard agent's fee is now fifty per cent. I don't approve of it myself, of course . . ." He coughed again. "But what with inflation, and the war on, and the high price of paper . . ." His face brightened. "But on the other hand, Patagonian rights are only forty per cent."

"That's nice," said Reginald vaguely. He couldn't get excited about the division of non-existent royalties. In fact, he couldn't get excited about anything. The failure of *Red Hot Mama* to have its expected revival had completely crushed him.

"But even with necessary deductions," continued the agent, "you should make enough out of the reprinting of your book to set you up for life."

Reprinting ! Reginald couldn't quite believe his ears.

"Do you really think there's a chance?" he asked tremulously.

"Chance ?" Scott laughed. "With a 'man from the past' publicity tie-in we can't miss." He put his fingers together and gazed dreamily at the ceiling.

"First we'll have a reception for the press, and then a big dinner for the major publishers at the Waldorf-Hilton at which you'll be the principal speaker." He closed his eyes and then suddenly snapped them open.

"Say," he demanded, "did you by any chance know Grodnick ? John Grodnick, the neo-Puritan poet ?"

"Of course," said Reggie in surprise. "He was a good friend of mine. But why call him neo-Puritan ? John's poetry was strictly wine, women, and song stuff."

The agent shrugged. "Not according to the university boys. But anyway he's really hot this season." He thought for a moment and then said enthusiastically, 'The Man Who Knew Grodnick.' With a kicker like that we've really got it made ! We'll keep the build-up going for a couple of months and then we'll let the big boys fight over reprint rights. What did you say your book was called ?"

"*Red Hot Mama*," said Reginald patiently.

Akermann made a quick note on a scratch pad. "I guess I'd better take a look at it before I do anything else." He switched on his intercom and gave an order to his robot secretary.

"Look at the paper !" protested Reginald. "Look at the binding ! I've been pirated by some cheap, fly-by-night outfit !"

"Cheap, hell !" said Akermann grimly. He tossed the book down on his desk angrily. "Do you know how much I had to pay for this ?"

Reginald shook his head.

"Fifty credits !"

"Is that a lot ?"

"A lot ? A credit is worth about two of your mid-twentieth century dollars."

Reginald let out a low whistle. "A hundred dollars ! For a copy of my book !" He gave an ecstatic smile. "Why didn't you tell me I was that important."

"Because I didn't know it," said Akermann sourly. "I'm not in the habit of buying pornography."

"PORNOGRAPHY !" Reginald jumped wildly to his feet.
"Not that again !"

"Again ?"

"I went through all that in Boston. But the courts supported me. If you'll check back into chapter six, you'll find that when Alice climbs into bed with the sheep herder, she has her bathrobe on and never takes it off. If a dirty minded public chooses to assume she did," he continued virtuously, "it's not my responsibility. James Joyce and I, we both—"

"Mr. Southern !" interrupted Akermann sharply. "You don't understand the changes that have taken place since your time. For an unmarried couple to go to bed with their clothes on . . . or a married one for that matter . . ." He blushed in spite of himself. "I like a risque story as well as the next man, but after all . . . I mean, really, Reggie . . ." He controlled himself with difficulty. "We'll just have to think of something else."

The trouble was that he couldn't. "Have you got any ideas ?" he said at last.

"Well," said Reginald unhappily, "there's always . . ." His voice broke and it took him a moment before he got it back under control again. "There's always . . ."

Reginald Southern stepped out on the platform and took an appreciative breath of the dry cool air that billowed in through the open windows. Now that automatic weather control had been installed, Kansas wasn't so bad after all. He looked down at the smiling faces of the expectant audience (it was a shame, though, that corsets had had to go out with all the rest) and gave them an affectionate nod as he thought of the banquet that was to follow his lecture. After six months of the sloppy synthetics that New Yorkers were so fond of, the prospect of fried chicken and creamed peas was enough to make a man's salivary glands work overtime.

As he waited for the toastmistress to finish her introduction, he ran quickly through his mental notes for the coming lecture. He'd better scrap that "most of you are too young to remember" line. After a hundred years it wasn't as complementary as it once had been. The Hemingway story—he'd have to keep that—at least until the current revival was over—but he could dump John Barrymore and restore Grodnick to his rightful place.

Next year, if the American Classics series brought out *Red Hot Mama* in an expurgated edition as Akermann had promised they would, he wouldn't have to make any more one night stands. He'd be able to stay in New York and . . .

It was the *and* that did it. He suddenly realized that he couldn't finish the sentence. The passage of a century hadn't changed New York. It was still cluttered with the once greats, the burned out rockets who had made a single spectacular flight twenty or thirty years before—and had never gone up again.

If he wanted it, there was always the place at the bar and the free drinks—tourists were kind—and the talk about the time when the critics would suddenly discover that the old writing was best after all. If he wanted it—but he suddenly realized that he didn't. Here he was somebody. Here there were people who would listen with respect while he told of John Grodnick and the rest.

"Dear Ladies," he said with a note of honest pleasure in his voice, "I can't tell you how good it is to be back in Kansas."

—Theodore R. Cogswell

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BOOK REVIEWS

In *The Dead Of Night*, edited by Michael Sissons (Panther Books, UK, 2/6) a fine macabre collection which didn't come our way in hard covers on first publication in 1961. Seventeen first-class stories by top-bracket authors—Priestley, Balchin, Waugh, Forester, Collier, and others, with three from our own genre: Bradbury, Matheson and Beaumont, of which only the Bradbury, "The Small Assassin," is over-familiar.

Timeless Stories For Today And Tomorrow, edited by Ray Bradbury (Bantam, USA, 60c) probably the most outstanding collection of its kind for many years. Twenty-six brilliant short stories by masters in the field chosen by master writer Bradbury and with an introduction by him—Kafka, Isherwood Dahl, Steinbeck, Bemelmans, Kuttner and many others.

Not Long For This World, (Ballantine Books, USA, 35c). Twenty-two short stories by August Derleth, sixteen of them from *Weird Tales* during its heyday in the 1930's.

The Ghoul Keepers, edited by Leo Margulies (Pyramid, USA, 35c). One might well say "In response to popular demand" editor Margulies has repeated the mixture from *Weird Tales* he so successfully selected in his earlier collection "The Unexpected." Perhaps because several of the stories have been anthologised elsewhere—Bradbury, Sturgeon, de Camp and Pratt—this second selection does not appear quite so attractive and the inclusion of a Seabury Quinn "Jules de Grandin" story (a great series while they lasted) does not lift it above the average for the older reader who would like to recapture some of the nostalgia of the late 30's.

Nevertheless, the nine stories which also include Kuttner, Hamilton, Bloch, Altshuler, are a good assortment for the new reader.

—John Carnell

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